



The Frost or The Bite: M/M Paranormal Romance (Elementally Yours Book 1)

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Category: LGBT+

Description: Earth, ice, or him?

Jack Blanchard is almost a real wizard. All he needs to do is accept one element's blessing, permanently. Jack enjoys earth magic but isn't sure he can disrupt centuries of icy family tradition. Then wolf shifter Ewan Oakley stumbles into his garden and starts awakening all his innermost desires.

Ewan Oakley's pack is on the brink of ruin and he needs one night to unwind. Spending the evening with an adorably uptight wizard is the most fun he's had in ages, but he can't ask for more, not with his pack in trouble.

Ewan opens Jack's eyes to new possibilities, and they create beautiful magic together. But even if Jack defies his magical destiny and takes control of his own life to be with Ewan, his untested earth powers may not be strong enough to save Ewan, his fellow shifters, or Jack himself from the pack's enemies...

Can Jack get the magic and man he truly desires, or will he be left out in the cold?

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Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:23 am

We live in a modern magical world. Nobody needs to hide their gifts, whether they come in the form of claws, spells, or wings. Seeing a person fly through the air on their way to work or spotting a mermaid in the ocean splashing in the water isn't unusual.

Not everyone gets along perfectly, but we try our best. Most of us wouldn't have it any other way.

Being proud of who you are and letting everyone embrace their truth applies to more than just the paranormal aspects of the world. A wizard can love another wizard openly too.

There's a lot of good in the world, but not everything is sunshine and rainbows. Especially not when you're Jack Blanchard, the son and heir to the long and illustrious magical legacy of Blanchard icebrands.

That's me. Jackson Alphin Blanchard.

To understand my story, you must understand magic.

Magic isn't a quick cure-all for any of life's problems. Magical power doesn't live in a wand and grant you your wildest dreams in an instant if you have a pointy hat and long white beard.

Raw, unfiltered power that can create or destroy can't simply be contained in a wand. Or in a measly human body. Magic without limits is an explosive rush of energy, a force bigger, wilder, and more unstoppable than any human can hope to control.

Using magic takes a toll. Casters must be careful not to strain our bodies so much that they give out. Or that our brush with mystical forces does not warp our minds and cause a mental breakdown.

This is where the elements come in.

Earth, wind, water, and fire are the basics, but there are more. See, the elements are forces too. Strong forces, capable of rivaling even the power of raw magic.

An element's blessing protects us beginners from harm when learning to use magic. And if chosen, a small piece of elemental essence can safely live inside us, transforming us and giving us the strength to use magic without breaking down. Instead of trying to hold the overwhelming potential for all magic, we devote ourselves to our chosen brand of elemental magic.

All human casters seek a permanent partnership with an element. But first, we must prove we're worthy. The elements don't just offer their brands to anyone.

I've been studying magic since I was a young boy. I have the skills and the knowledge necessary. All I need is an element's essence.

I'm so very close to becoming a real wizard.

And yet, I'm also very far.

Little do I know that I'm about to meet a man who will change everything, including how I think about magic and my place in the world.

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Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:23 am

A cold haughty face stares up at me from the phone. I just returned home from my classes at the university nearby, and it feels like I'm stepping right into a trap.

Everything seemed so normal a moment ago.

I entered the kitchen to make a pot of tea before going to my room to study. The house, as always, is freezing cold so that ice and ice magic can thrive here. Then my mother strolled in, thrust her phone into my hands, and started singing the praises of her society friend's son who just returned from boarding school.

"The Brass's are such good friends and you and Percy used to get along so well." For about five minutes, when we were six.

My mother, Gwendolyn Blanchard, is an old money icebrand who isn't impressed by anyone. Some say her heart is as frozen as her home. So why has this man melted her icy exterior? I have a pretty good idea.

"He's handsome, isn't he?" Mother comments, and that confirms my suspicions.

This is a trap. I'm being set up.

My family apparently thinks my romantic prospects are so dire, that I'm so incapable of landing a man on my own, that they're setting me up on dates with eligible men. I just turned 22! Is this really happening?

The man on the screen is around my age and attractive enough. He has classical features, keen eyes, and neat light brown hair. There's also no denying the haughty

smugness in his eyes and the superiority that makes his lips quirk up in a smirk. His eyes are a weak blue color but that frosty stare chills me even through the screen.

Or maybe the chill comes from my environment. Spring edges towards summer outside, but winter always reigns supreme at the Blanchard estate.

“—Percy all but branded already, he only needs a bit of luck in his personal life to ground him.” Percy Brass. A name just as pretentious as his picture. “Every major element desired him and yet he always knew his destiny lay in the ice.”

The teapot on the kitchen stove whistles, signaling my tea is ready. No match for the kettle, Mother thankfully stops praising the virtues of this eligible icy bachelor and goes into the other room.

Marty Russo arrives through the kitchen door and plucks the teapot off the stove before I’ve recovered from my shock.

Marty and I met at Primrose University where we both attend magical classes. I consider him a friend, though he now works as my mother’s personal assistant. He asked me to put in a good word with my family when he needed a part-time job. I made him promise he wouldn’t hate me if it worked and he got the job. My parents aren’t easy people to please.

”Is this really happening?” I whisper to him. I hand him the phone and from the picture, my horrified expression, and panicked hand gestures, he figures out what he walked in on.

“Relax, Jack. They just want you to meet the guy. You don’t have to marry him.”

“That’s a relief.”

He smirks. “But they’d really, really like it if you do wed. A December wedding, wouldn’t that be lovely?”

“Not funny.” I glare at my friend. “You aren’t helping.”

Marty grins, then realizes the latest example of parental overstepping distracted him as he shivers in the cold. He starts shrugging on his parka. A few heads shorter than me, he’s wearing a gray sweater and dark slacks, his brown hair gelled into a professional style for work. The parka ruins the whole professional picture but is necessary for him. Even in the kitchen with the stove on, ice creeps along the walls and a chill lingers in the air.

“You two are a perfect match.” Marty holds up the phone and the man’s picture, waggling his eyebrows. “You’re both from the same upper crust circles and old magical families. You’re both bound for the ice. Are you telling me selecting a life partner is about more than that?”

For my parents, no.

Marty moves the picture closer to me and I dodge the phone. Nothing changes when I see the face there again. No love connection forms. He’s not bad looking but enormously self-important. If his ego is clear in a picture, I can’t imagine how much worse he’ll be in person.

I put the phone on the counter and pushed it away. “He’s a little... cold.”

Marty snorts. “You better get used to that.”

“I’ll get your tea,” he says next. Marty doesn’t work for me in any capacity, so his motives here are selfish. “And I’ll have a cup too.” He rubs his hands together to warm them up.

Marty grew up with a firebrand mother, so he's more sensitive to the cold. Parkas like his aren't necessary for me.

I can distantly feel the cold and the chill in the air, but it doesn't bother me. The ice magic running through my parent's veins means I inherited a high tolerance for the cold. Icy features have even seeped into my appearance. My hair is an unnatural shade of white, just like my parents. Ice is all I've ever known. My parents expect me to continue in the Blanchard family's long history of being powerful, respected, wealthy icebrands.

If I follow in their footsteps and embrace my icy destiny, I'll become a real wizard. An icebrand with more power and freedom than any novice is ever allowed. The long years of studying will be over. The protections and limits that give me only a small taste of true magical power will fall away, and I'll have the freedom to explore my element to its fullest.

But there's always a catch.

"What do you think?" Mother pops back into the room. "You finished early today. That leaves plenty of time for you to meet Percy Brass for lunch, just the two of you."

"Today isn't good for me," I lie. "We can set something up one of these days. I'll check my schedule."

"No need for that. He's swinging by in—" she glances at her watch. "15 minutes."

"Mom!"

"What? He recently moved back into town. Wouldn't it be nice for him to catch up and see some old friends?"

”We met one time, several years ago,” I remind. “That doesn’t make us old friends.”

Mother disagrees. “Then you’ll have plenty of catching up to do.” She places a hand on my shoulder to impart advice. “If you aren’t moving forward towards a brand, you’re moving backwards. The time goes by so fast. You can’t let magic slip through your fingers.”

“Hold on,” I say. “All the professors and lessons say it’s wise not to rush, to be sure before committing to an element. The brand can’t be changed later.”

That’s the catch. There are no elemental divorces. An element requires a lifetime commitment. It also transforms you in body and soul and magic. Once fire or ice or lightning is in your heart and soul, there’s no kindly asking it to leave. There are no take backs.

Mother scoffs and accepts the cup of tea from Marty that she assumes is her own. “Don’t quote your professors to me. One shouldn’t rush when finding a suitable element. Once you’ve decided on the element you seek, you need to make progress. Besides, those lessons aren’t designed with Blanchards in mind.”

She winces at the tea when it touches her tongue. The snowflake shaped mark on her shoulder glows faintly as a thin layer of frost travels from her hand to cover the outside of the teacup. She prefers her drinks, and everything else, the colder the better.

Unlike us, Mother wears a sleeveless blouse. Pure white hair flows all the way down her back. The large snowflake mark that looks frozen onto her left shoulder is her brand, the magical mark connecting her to the ice element for the rest of her life. She received it when she accepted ice’s essence and transformed into an icebrand.

Elements usually attract like-minded people, and the qualities they share with an

element are only heightened after branding. My parents are the perfect example of that. Severe, impenetrable, cold, and unchanging. After all, ice at its strongest is thick and solid. Not easily moldable or adaptable. If ice cracks or melts, then it's liable to break.

Blanchards don't break. Not ever, not for anyone. Not even for their own son.

"You already know where you're headed," Mother reminds me. "You just have to get there."

Satisfied with having the last word, she waltzes out of the kitchen.

My story is all written out. Jack Blanchard will become an icebrand. Everything important has already been decided. It's up to me to get on with the program. Why is that thought so depressing? I've wanted magic since even before I could talk in full sentences.

"It's a nice day out," Marty says. "I can keep her busy for a few minutes if you need a break."

"You're the best." I give him my untouched cup of tea.

He swigs the drink down quick for warmth and puts on a determined game face. "Hey, Mrs. Blanchard, the pipes are freezing up again."

"Why do we even bother?" she mutters from deeper inside the house. "We should tear the whole place down and start over entirely, using only ice."

Almost the entire interior of the house is encrusted in ice, but the exterior fits in with other estates on the street. My favorite spot certainly is free of frost. I know exactly what I need right now.

* * *

I slip out the kitchen door and head towards the back of our property. My escape is quick but not too quick. My feet skid across the path as frost covers the surface and makes it slippery.

“Not today ice, not today.”

The magical freeze enforced by my parents clings to the edges of the house and takes a bit of distance before the enchantments stop and the normal environment is back in control of the surroundings.

Inside their icy domain, it’s hard to feel anything but cold. Yet like always, the real world is still out here. The bright sunny day drives away the chill from inside. A clear blue sky overhead and birds chirping show that winter remains far away.

“Almost there,” I whisper. I carefully navigate as I reach the lawn and green grass free of ice.

Am I almost there? Sometimes the magic seems so close and others... lots of people do brand in their 20s...but it takes others as long as three to four decades. There’s no exact timetable. We study until we’re done. We study until we brand.

Studying and training for decades doesn’t even secure you a brand. If you’re successful, you receive a test. If you pass, then you receive the brand.

Obviously, these tests amount to more than filling in the correct bubbles with a number two pencil.

Only an element truly knows when and why it issues a test and deems someone worthy. That hasn’t stopped my parents from taking action and deciding that a strong

partner is what I'm missing. Mixing romance and magic can go wrong in about a million ways, but it can also lead to the strongest partnerships.

Should I be able to stand up to my parents? Perhaps. It's much more challenging when they are absolute in what they expect while I'm not sure.

I hardly even have time for a lover. I don't even know my preferred element—well...

I like ice. The magic comes naturally. Ice is in my veins, but there's another type of magic I also enjoy.

"Hello there," I tell my garden as I arrive at the back corner of the estate.

Earth magic is nice. Something about dirt under my fingers and the smell of blooming flowers in the air has always comforted me. My garden is modest and mostly full of plants and herbs used in spellcasting. I still feel so much pride at seeing rows of neat green leaves and colorful petals. My hands brush along the petals of the marigold and the jasmine as I move towards the altar in the middle of my little garden.

I close my eyes and kneel at the altar. My knees press directly into the earth and the smooth stone surface of the altar gives me a place to set my tokens down and work. When my parents are breathing down my neck or an exercise at school proves impossible, I enjoy visiting my garden and doing some earth magic. I need this right now, a moment to relax and catch my breath.

I grab my preserved flower token. The token is blessed by an earthbrand on behalf of the earth element, which gives me the protection needed to safely cast novice spells before being branded.

Closing my eyes, I clutch the petal token in my hands and let the magic fill me. What

should I do? I wonder. Just give me a sign. Summoning the earth's power, a breeze ruffles my hair and the scent of the garden around me becomes stronger. I feel earth magic gather around me, warm and vibrant as—

Before I do anything, hairs raise on the back of my neck. Something changes. A slight rustle catches my attention. A thought strikes me with certainty.

I'm not alone.

I open my eyes and see a giant wolf looming above me.

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One moment, the warm, vibrant energy of the earth surrounds me. The next, I know I'm not alone and I open my eyes to find a massive wolf looming over me. I'm staring up at a towering figure, face to face with a snout and two gleaming rows of lethally sharp teeth.

My heart starts beating double time as I try to think through panic. I can't outrun this creature. My grasp of defensive earth magic for a fight is woefully lacking.

The wolf huffs and backs up to give me room. A bushy tail ticks and tucks in behind him almost bashfully. Did he realize he startled me?

The new distance between us lets me evaluate him more clearly. He's bigger than a regular wolf. It is unlikely this gated community and the carefully manicured lawns of the estates here were found by a wild wolf and mistaken for the forest. He must be a shapeshifter.

Hopefully, he's a shapeshifter. Because I'm in serious trouble if the intelligent blue eyes watching me belong to an animal.

"H-hello there." I manage to find my voice. "Where did you come from?"

Naturally, the wolf says nothing. He does seem to understand me. Definitely a shapeshifter.

"Thanks for dropping by." I wince because I don't know what else to say and I've switched to default politeness. "I mean, well, it's nice to meet you?"

He huffs out a breath. Nice to meet you too, I imagine he responds as amusement sparkles in his eyes. This isn't right. He's the one who snuck up on me, he should feel foolish and caught, yet I'm the one being unbearably silly.

At least my life seems less in danger the more he watches me calmly. He isn't acting like a cornered wild animal. I'm the one acting more cornered and off guard.

"Um, can I help you with something?" I wonder like an idiot while I stare.

Light blond fur covers his large form, and he isn't quite as terrifying as he seemed a moment ago. I keep staring like I have no manners whatsoever and was never forced to attend etiquette classes. I can't help myself. He's mesmerizing. I've never been up close to a shapeshifter in their animal form before.

And then it gets better. His form ripples and starts changing.

The best casters allow magic to flow from them seamlessly, shaping an idea into reality like it's the simplest thing in the world. Shapeshifting seems more complicated. It may be natural for shifters, but it still involves altering one's anatomy and physical form, altering even your skeleton to twist into a new shape. The process always sounded painful to me, but this guy makes it look natural, a fluid transition between fur to skin. Even when the man is on his hands and knees for a moment, it doesn't seem silly.

He rises gracefully, standing to his full height.

A man stands before me. Proud, unashamed... and totally naked. My eyes see him, see all of him, since I haven't been able to look away since the wolf appeared. I get a very good look. It's like I'm in a trance.

"Hey," he says, casual and friendly like one of us—him—isn't naked. "Thanks for

the warm welcome.” He huffs a laugh. “Could have been a lot worse.”

His rough yet pleasant voice jolts me out of my daze. My eyes snap up to his, and there are those same blue eyes the wolf wore.

I blink furiously to get miles of smooth skin and the firm lines of his body out of my mind. It doesn’t quite work. An attractive naked man has just appeared in my yard. He seems steady, comfortable in his own skin, though maybe all wolves are? How is that possible right now? I wouldn’t be nearly as calm to find myself naked in an outdoor setting with a stranger. What the hell am I supposed to do?

Here’s one idea: stop staring at the nude man like a total idiot!

“What, what are you doing here?” I squawk as I rise from the altar and stand. “This is private property; you can’t just wander in and—”

“Yeah,” he says dryly. “This is more like the reaction I expected.”

“This is what happens when you drop by unannounced and scare people half to death!” I nearly shout, fixing my gaze on the hedge to his left.

Now he sounds concerned. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to freak you out.”

“A huge wolf appeared in my garden and turned into a” naked, naked, naked, “human trespasser who definitely knows that other people’s lawns are off-limits. My garden isn’t suited for carousing wolves! How am I supposed to react? Comment on the weather and invite you in for tea?”

“Oh no, I didn’t trample your plants, did I?” he comes closer to inspect the chamomile bush near him with concern.

Having a naked stranger get closer to me will not help me calm down and think clearly. A male stranger, too. Who looks like that. A naked woman would be doubly awkward but wouldn't fry my braincells the same way.

Nakedness may be normal for shifters, but handsome naked people don't stroll through my yard every day. My parents would faint if they saw him. Or start hurling icicles.

"The plants are alright," I promise hurriedly. "Stay right there!"

"The wolf side doesn't always care about private property," he explains. "Usually, I steer it in the right direction to avoid things like this, but..." this time he's the one to look away, almost bashful. "We caught a really amazing scent."

"That's why you're here, you sniffed out the neighbor's azalea bushes?"

"No, it was a scent but also sort of a feeling?" Even when unable to stare directly at him anymore, I feel him totally focused on me. "I think it was you."

Now I might faint. An undressed stranger just said that to me. Handling this was not covered in any of the etiquette courses my parents forced me to attend as a child.

"Were you about to do magic?" he wonders. "Are you a wizard?"

"A novice wizard, yes."

He nods like he expected that. "You were casting earth magic, right? I caught this warm, fresh scent that reminded me of our pack lands, back when..." He shakes his head. "The earth magic brought me here. Sorry if I startled you, but I think it's a compliment." He sounds so sweet and earnest as he says, "I just had to see what that magic was capable of."

“Oh.” It’s all I can manage to say.

“Do you forgive me?”

“I-I...”

The man is much more polite and respectful than you’d expect for an unclothed trespasser. He clearly meant no harm and can’t even help being undressed since wolves don’t carry a change of pants with them when shifting.

But this is even more startling than his birthday suit. He came here because of me. And just when I thought I’d almost gotten used to carrying on a civil conversation with a buck-naked person in broad daylight, that sentiment is more than I can handle.

Ice types don’t like being caught off guard or unprepared. See, ice is either solid or it melts. You need firm control, or you’ll start slipping, drip by drip, until all that’s left is a puddle.

“I forgive you,” I manage. I force myself not to imagine an ice cube brushing across that strong collarbone, drops of water sliding down his chest to his abs... “For the love of god, can I please get you a pair of pants?”

He chuckles quietly. “That would be great, thanks.”

My hands grip my cellphone so tight I fear it will crack and my cheeks flame as I go about trying to ask Marty to send me some men’s clothes. I barely manage to keep my gaze on the screen when the barrage of questions begins, but it seems marginally safer than staring at him.

Many details are purposefully left out of the text messages. Marty still realizes the extra clothes aren’t for me. I’m surprised he doesn’t come to check out the view.

Instead, a paper airplane sails towards us. Magically enchanted, of course, because a bundle of clothes is tied under it and the paper carries the weight without strain.

“Whoa,” the man murmurs, finally focused elsewhere and giving me a moment to breathe.

“Elemental magic does come in handy.” I laugh weakly, still a touch breathless.

He picked up on the magic in the air, but he must not see magic too often because he looks so amazed. Our power is meager compared to branded wizards, but we do have more versatility. Us novices learn simple spells for a variety of elements in order to practice and understand magic as a whole, which can be fun and useful.

With a last gust of air magic, the clothes float into my hands. My face must be bright red as I hand them over. “Here, these are for you.”

I do avert my gaze, but my eyes keep sliding back towards him.

Just shy of six feet myself, he’s around my height. With him barefoot and his toes digging into the earth, he may be taller than me with his shoes on. He has a stockier build with both more meat and muscle than me. His animal side and him have some things in common. His short blond hair matches the wolf’s coat, and those clear blue eyes are about the same in both forms.

He has a peach complexion, not noticeably tan, but he spends enough time in the sun to earn a few faint tan lines—and that’s when I realize I’m staring too hard and trying to absorb every detail like there will be a pop quiz later.

I stare down at my shoes, afraid to look anywhere else until he steps towards me, thankfully clothed, and extends a hand. “Hey, I’m Ewan.”

“I’m Jack. Nice to meet you properly.”

We shake hands. Given that I just saw him completely undressed, shaking his hand feels much too intimate... not that I really mind as much as I should.

“So, am I too late?” He looks around and nods to the altar where he found me. “Did I miss the show?”

“Oh, you, you still want to see me cast?”

“If you don’t mind.” Ewan gives me a friendly smile.

I’m stammering and off guard again. “I-I’m afraid it won’t be very impressive. I wasn’t planning on an audience. I just came out here to take a break from...”

I cut off because I don’t know him and don’t need to dump my problems on him. Then I realize his borrowed slacks and pressed linen shirt aren’t mine. My clothes probably wouldn’t fit him.

Oh god, Marty stole clothes from my father.

My father, oh dear, he can never know. I’ll have to replace these clothes. I can’t put them back. Someone else, a stranger, wearing clothes that are his and then him wearing those same clothes again? Oh no. There’s something so waspy and proper inside me that bristles at the idea, it’s much too intimate.

“You need a break from?” he prompts when I trail off.

“From being inside,” I answer vaguely.

The man, Ewan, knows that isn’t what I was going to say yet only nods and doesn’t

force the issue. “So, you needed a break and came out here to cast. Are you an earthbrand? Or an earthbrand in training?”

“No, not really. It’s funny,” I say. “Us wizards in training spend so much time preparing to become real wizards and take a brand. It’s excruciating, being so close to power, real power, and only having a little taste. We’re all impatient and desperate for the day we finally get our element. I feel so silly for suddenly thinking things are moving too fast.”

Almost as if I cast a magic spell, a weight lifts off my chest. Like all I really needed was to share my concerns with a sympathetic ear who listened without judgement.

Then my phone beeps with a text message and I realize I’ve been out here too long.

”Actually,” I say with some regret. “I should get back. I’ve probably spent too much time away as it is.”

Ewan gives me a strange look. “Or maybe not enough.”

“Excuse me?”

“Nothing’s wrong with taking a break.” He sends me a sly smile. “I’m just wondering if you need a longer one. I know I do, and it sounds like we’ve got a lot in common.”

“Really?” I enjoy the thought of that but I’m not so sure.

Ewan lays out his case. “We’re both supernatural, we’re both dealing with personal issues and need some time away from our troubles to relax. We both have a connection to the earth.”

“No, I’m not even formally studying the earth element,” I point out. Even as I protest,

I find myself wondering about his side of things and what personal problems brought him to my backyard.

“If you’re casting earth magic during your much-needed break, it obviously means something to you.” He’s perceptive. It almost feels like I’m the one naked this time.

Then his even gaze turns teasing and a smile tugs at his lips. “And it seems like we get along, you know, when you’re done screaming about private property and nearly fainting at the sight of a naked man.”

“You startled me!” I defend instantly. “The reaction was entirely warranted! I wasn’t expecting a naked man to stroll into my yard, that’s all. Naked men don’t make me faint, I’ve seen plenty of—” His smile grows at that and I realize, “There is no good way to finish this sentence.”

“What if we spend the day together?” he asks. “Just get away from it all for a while and relax?”

“W-what? Are you serious?” I can’t believe this. “We don’t even know each other.”

He shrugs. “Maybe that’s exactly what we need.”

The idea is crazy. Or it should be. There are so many reasons I shouldn’t entertain his suggestion that I don’t know where to begin. However... I’m not looking forward to the idea of saying no.

But I must decline. Because... because... all those reasons why I should say no suddenly disappear and I struggle to remember what the problem is.

Until one of those reasons comes to find me. A man calls out to me across the lawn.

“Jack, are you out here?”

My would-be suitor has arrived to collect me.

* * *

When I hear someone calling my name, I stiffen and wonder about the bizarre turn my usually orderly life has taken.

Ewan is little more than a handsome stranger I just met. There are a million reasons not to run off with the first handsome man who smiles at me and makes me forget my troubles for a bit. Was I really considering his proposal? And what am I supposed to do now that we’ve been interrupted?

The voice calls out for me again. “Jack? Are you out here?”

Ewan’s head turns towards the direction of my family’s home, tracking the person in the distance who I can only assume is heading this way. A row of hedges bracket us on both sides, my garden sectioned off between the edge of my family’s property and the neighboring one.

I can’t see the one-man search party, but given the reason I came out for a break, the unfamiliar male voice must belong to my would-be suitor Percy. He showed up for our lunch and my mother sent him out here to fetch me.

”Friend of yours?” Ewan wonders.

A nervous sound escapes my throat as I shake my head.

My parents invited Percy Brass over and now I need to play good host and impress him. I must look like a deer in the headlights as I stand there frozen, waiting for this

man and all my obligations to catch up to me once more.

“Need a rescue?” Ewan asks.

“Yes please.”

He grabs my hand and darts across the edge of the garden, careful not to hurt the plants yet swift enough that I’m already running along behind him before I even realize what’s happening. Ewan weaves behind the other row of hedges that block off the neighboring property from ours.

It’s like a game of hide and seek. A laugh escapes me at the absurdity of the situation.

“Shh! We’re being sneaky here.”

I laugh again and he gives me a stern glare, only able to maintain it for a brief moment until he’s huffing out a laugh too. Then we’re basically giggling like idiots and huddling against a tree behind the hedge as we hunker down in our hiding spot.

We wait for a breathless moment. I use the base of the tree to lift up enough to see over the hedge. No one is in the garden on the other side—oh!

I duck back down when movement registers just beyond the hedges closest to my family’s side. We frantically try to stifle our fit of giggles and nudge each other to be quiet. Even looking at each other threatens to set us off again.

Ewan peeks up over the hedge next. I think he just wants to see who it is we’re hiding from. The view doesn’t impress him because he snorts and rolls his eyes. The second or so he spends with the top of his head over the hedge seems much longer to me and I drag him back down.

Ewan whispers, “He looks uptight.”

“That’s because he is.” That’s my bet anyway.

“And not the fun kind of uptight, like you.”

“Excuse me?” I demand in a heated whisper, and his lips quirk up.

“Jack?” Percy calls out. “Are you here?”

Oh frosty hell. We both fall still and quiet now that Percy wanders around in the garden. Neither of us move a muscle as we huddle together. I try not to count the seconds, silently begging Percy Brass to give up and turn around.

Peeking through a sparse area in the hedge allows me to glimpse the same stiff man whose picture stared up at me from a phone screen a short while ago. He turns in my direction and I lean back and stifle a gasp at nearly being caught.

“Are you out here?” Percy tries again, then mutters to himself. “Did he leave? Who does that? We have an appointment.”

He’s so huffy and put out. I bite my lip to avoid bursting into inappropriate laughter. Ewan’s shoulders tremble beside me as he shakes with silent amusement.

Percy obviously received the same etiquette lessons as me. I actually understand how he feels. A polite, professional adult would never be so rude as to break an agreed upon appointment without any warning. Except I didn’t agree to anything, my mother set everything up.

Only quiet greets my ears. Several seconds pass. I hear nothing from near my garden. Is the coast clear?

I raise my head and nearly clear the hedge as Ewan yanks me back. I remember too late I'm with a werewolf with more advanced senses who can tell me whether the coast is clear or not. The other man is still over there.

"Hello?" Percy asks.

Ewan pulls me away from the hedge and I fall back against the tree and—and everything else becomes an afterthought.

The bark of the tree digs into my lower back. My back presses against the tree and now Ewan presses up against me. Our front halves are touching from our shoulders down. So close I'd be able to feel him breathe, but he isn't. Neither am I.

Our eyes are locked together, and we're frozen in this intimate position. It's strange to be this close to someone I barely know and yet I have no desire to pull away. It hits me that I don't know the man on the other side of the hedge either. My parents know his parents, they know his reputation, and they think they know everything that matters.

From everything I've seen, there's only one man I'm curious to learn more about. I'm staring into his clear blue eyes and already dreading the moment we'll need to separate.

I don't know Ewan well, but I know enough. Enough to want to know more. I know that I like how his body feels against mine.

Staring deep into his eyes, I can tell he feels it too. He's as transfixed by the budding connection between us as me.

The sound of footsteps reaches my ears. I tense and close my eyes, and the moment ends. The steps become harder to hear. Oh, Percy is leaving and getting farther away

since he thinks I'm not out here.

We wait for several breathless seconds, then Ewan nods and tells me the coast is clear.

"Who is that guy?" he wonders as we back away and untangle ourselves.

It takes me a moment to even remember. "A-a friend of the family."

"Really? You don't seem to like him."

"I don't know him. I don't much want to."

Ewan turns to me expectantly. "I guess this means you're free for the day."

"You seriously want to spend the rest of the day together?" I wonder. He proposed the same thing before Percy interrupted, that we escape our worries and relax.

"Why not? We can keep it simple." He thinks it over and lays out the terms. "No last names, no identifying details, we don't need to share anything unless we want to. Let's just get out of here and do whatever we want. Hell, we can do nothing. One night, then we go our separate ways when we're finished, no questions asked."

It does sound strangely perfect. One night to forget everything else. And no expectations from the man with me. I won't see him again so I can let loose.

Yes, it does cross my mind that he seems like the sort of person I might like to see more than once. But introducing a werewolf I just met into my life would come with its own set of headaches and questions. A temporary friendship like this is better.

"Do you really think this will work?" I shoot him a sly grin. "How anonymous are we

if you already know where I live?”

“I’ll just pretend I have no idea what you’re talking about,” he says. “So, what do you say? Wanna play hooky with me?”

His smile is boyish and charming, though he really doesn’t have to convince me anymore. This time, I don’t give my answer too much thought. I just say exactly what I want to.

“I’m in.”

We both need a break. I have free time now that my afternoon is open, and Ewan already helped me out by hiding me. I’d like to return the favor. This may be crazy, but I’m excited to escape my regular life, even if only for a day.

Maybe a day off is exactly what I need.

My choice has nothing to do with how it felt when we were pressed together close, I promise myself. It’s a lie.

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Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:23 am

Escape feels forbidden, but it happens easily. We sprint through backyards we don't belong in together, hopefully going fast enough that nobody has time to spot us.

The thought of being caught doesn't even scare me. Our great escape is... fun. We laugh as we sprint over the green lawns under our feet.

"You're trespassing." Ewan scolds as we jump over the Montgomery's azalea bushes. "How dare you? People don't like a strange wizard running through their backyards."

He's clearly only teasing me since I scolded him for trespassing earlier and yet I can't help rising to the bait. "I'm not a stranger. They'll all know me as the son of—" We aren't supposed to reveal any other details about ourselves, even if he already knows where I live, but that isn't what stops me.

If anyone gazed out onto their lawn at exactly the wrong time and spotted me traipsing across a neighbor's property, running wild with a strange man... they'll all know exactly who I am. Any neighbor would complain to my parents and tell everyone. Oh my god, that's actually so much worse than being an unknown trespasser. Now I am a tad scared.

But not scared enough to stop.

"I blame you," I say. "You're a terrible influence."

"Yeah," he agrees. "I'm real broken up about it."

"Somehow I don't believe you."

”This is the first time I’ve seen you smile, so clearly something is going right.”

I nearly stumble over the last hedge keeping us from the road. He reaches out, but I hold up my hands and manage to regain my balance on my own.

He’s right too. I already feel better. Lighter. However, we’re both suddenly unsure of what to do next.

We trade shy glances. Ewan offers to drive us to wherever we’re heading and he leads the way to his vehicle. Arriving at his truck takes a few minutes. Fortunately his actual clothes are there and he quickly changes while I look away as common courtesy dictates. I know exactly what sights I’m trying to avoid seeing again and that doesn’t help calm my suddenly rioting nerves.

He trades the business casual clothes for worn jeans, a V-neck white shirt, and a checkered flannel. This style suits him much better.

We pile into his vehicle in search of adventure. And then it hits me. I’m really heading into the unknown with a man I barely know. I like what I do know about him, but... Are we really doing this? Am I? What have I gotten myself into?

I feel the seatbelt holding me in, feel the truck cruising over the road, but it doesn’t seem real.

The grand homes we pass are tastefully extravagant, rarely displaying modern architecture or anything built in this century or the previous. A place where old money families live comfortably. Money does matter here, but reputation, legacy, and always presenting a pristine image matters just as much.

What would my mother think about all this? God, I’d rather not consider such a dismal subject... I can’t resist checking my phone. They must already know I’m

gone. Percy Brass returning by himself after being sent to fetch me is a dead giveaway. The real question isn't whether my mother has tried to reach me but how many times.

There are four missed calls with voicemails that I don't bother listening to. Our spontaneous escapade will end too soon if his wolfy ears hear the messages clearly and I die of embarrassment. I do check the text messages, all seven-eight of them and counting.

Mother: Percy had trouble locating you. Please return to the house at once.

Mother: Did you leave on purpose? We have company. This is terribly rude.

Mother: What in the world has gotten into you? Are you playing a game? This isn't funny. Come back to the house. Immediately.

I shudder and can't bring myself to read the rest. A couple of messages from Marty are there too. They aren't exactly better, only much less frigid.

Marty: I don't even... what is happening? First you need clothes for a man who isn't you. Clothes like a shirt and pants. For a possibly NAKED man. Now you're gone. Are the two related? You're still Jack, right? There's no chance you ran off with a naked guy. Right?

Marty: Your mom's reaction is priceless, but I'm too scared to be caught recording her rant about this 'childish stunt' or your 'late onset teenage rebellion,' so you'll just have to imagine her face for yourself.

Marty: Seriously though, let one of us know there's no reason to be worried about whatever you're up to. This isn't funny anymore if you're in trouble.

Marty: And you owe me all the details later.

Unfortunately, I can imagine my mother's face too well. I have nightmares about that face. I usually bend over backwards to avoid it. Part of me is tempted to tell Ewan to turn the car around. I wonder if I made a mistake.

No. For the first time in too long, I feel in control of my own choices and my own future. If not long-term, then at least for the day. I can't stop now.

Jack: Needed a break. I'm okay. I'll be home tomorrow.

I send the message to both my mother and Marty. Then I look up to see where we're going.

Ewan drives towards the highway. I live in a small suburb about fifteen minutes from a larger city. The city is the best bet for two travelers seeking adventure or at least something to do for the night. I smile when we pass one edge of the university campus before reaching the highway. Huh...

"What's going on?" I wonder.

"Nothing. Just driving."

The truck cruises down the road, a tad too slow for highway travel. We're in the farthest right lane and other drivers keep changing lanes and going around us. Ewan must worry about me having second thoughts. He's ready to turn the car around at a moment's notice if I give the word.

My phone beeps as new messages come in. I turn it off and do my best to relax. That's the point of our trip after all.

“Go faster,” I say. “You’re driving like my Elemental History professor and he’s 103 years old.”

Ewan snorts and speeds up. Off we go.

* * *

We aren’t on the highway long before Ewan spots something as we approach the city. He suggests we hit an upcoming outdoor shopping center and I agree.

There are rows of popular stores, chain restaurants, and a movie theater. The place is always busy during nice weather, and a fair crowd exists already, eager to start enjoying their weekends early.

”What now?” I ask.

”Food?” he suggests.

We decide on sub sandwiches and chips, easy enough to travel and eat outside with. Mine is garden veggie filled with lettuce and peppers and greens. His has a few veggies and a double helping of salami and pepperoni.

Our shared appreciation of earth magic brought us together so being out near the earth seems best, though there isn’t really anything natural about the open courtyard lined by shops and restaurants.

”What now?” I ask again once we find a table and start eating.

”Well, we can busy ourselves with our food and pretend this isn’t kinda awkward or we can break the ice.”

I'm not sure what the protocol is for this... there probably isn't a protocol. We wanted a night of fun and easy with a virtual stranger, not people who know us and everything in our lives. We still need to be a bit familiar with each other. Who is the man I'm sharing this adventure with?

"Second one," I decide. "I'd like to know a bit more about you."

"Good," he smiles over his food. "I'm not really a beat around the bush type of guy."

"What kind of guy are you?"

"Regular," he says immediately, then corrects himself with a quick grin. "If a little wolfy. I like watching sports with the guys and family dinners on Sundays. I'm 28 and come from a small family. I only have one sister but a large pack. We're all really close, so it's like having a bunch of extra siblings, cousins, and nosy neighbors."

The affection he feels for his family and pack is obvious as he talks about them, and the picture he paints of himself is so personal. Okay, not personal in the sense he's spilling dark secrets. But it's about him and the things that matter to him. It's refreshing. He happened to leave out all the frills and accomplishments that people in my family's circles think of as vital statistics.

Still, I have to ask, "What line of work are you in?"

"Construction," he says. "It pays the bills and I enjoy working with my hands." Building something physical by hand, creating anything the human way, is a subject I know literally nothing about. He must see that on my face. "It's not just about hammering nails and laying drywall. There's probably more in common with magic than you might think."

"Oh really?" I raise an eyebrow but he doesn't take it back.

"You start with a picture in your mind," he explains. "Or a blueprint in my case, and it's about carefully putting everything together to get the right result. Magic and construction take preparation and thought to create something that people can both use and enjoy."

It's a nice gesture that he tried to frame his job in terms I can relate to. His description of magic being both enjoyable and useful is exactly how I wish it could be. I often find myself casting for other reasons, all practical and about furthering my knowledge more than anything else.

He sets his food down and gives me his attention. "What about you?"

"Oh, I do some research work at the university in the magical studies department. But becoming branded is very much a full-time job." I rattle off the words and stare at the children playing on an artificial patch of grass nearby. Then I realize it's quite possible he wanted to learn more about me and not just what I do.

"Honestly, I haven't had much time for a personal life lately." I wince at the words and take a sip of my drink. "Which is silly. An element can help us wield magic but also takes a toll if we're not in harmony with the element and ourselves. You're supposed to have a solid support system in place and a life outside of being a wizard, in theory. Or at least some understanding of who you are and what you want." I sigh. "Since we can't even take the test until we're 18, however, we get a little overeager when we're finally eligible for branding, hoping it will happen immediately. We dive into studying and lose sight of the rest. I'm no exception."

"I thought you were dragging your feet earlier."

"That's probably part of the problem," I groan. "One minute I wish it was over and

done with and the next I just want a little more time. Though I suppose that has as much to do with—" I cut off.

"What?" He asks. Not pressuring me, only ready to listen.

"My parents," I answer. "No one should rush into branding, but it would make things easier. If it were over and done with, then they'd relax." Once I became an icebrand like them. "They're eager for me to follow in their footsteps, so they put a lot of pressure on me."

The words are true. I still feel guilty and terribly ungrateful. They've given me a comfortable life and every advantage for the future. In return, I've always been the good son and done what was expected of me. I enjoy making my parents proud and ice magic comes easily to me.

It's only recently I've realized that every hoop they've given me to jump through gets me one step closer to the future they planned out for me, and I can't just be a Blanchard. I have to be Jack too.

I'm not sure Jack will be enough for my parents. But Ewan seems to like me just fine.

"Your family isn't you," he says. "It's your life and your element. Isn't that the point, that you select what suits you best?"

"Yes." I lean closer like I'm offering him a secret. "Though you might be surprised by how many branded people that belong to wealthy, well-respected families with centuries upon centuries of tradition find that the element that suits them best just so happens to be the one that also helps them live up to their familial obligations."

He thinks it over and stretches, leaning back in his seat. "Well, I'd tell you to say screw them and do what you want to do."

”But you’d be lying?”

”No, it’s probably good advice,” he admits. “Except wolf shifters have trouble with that too. Actual wolves, it turns out, are less pack oriented than most people think. But us werewolves aren’t the same. It’s tricky to find that right balance between respecting your alphas and doing what’s best for the pack and being true to yourself.”

While I’d like to be a friendly ear and listen to his troubles like he did for me, I’m much less skilled at it. “Is, uh, is that what you’re struggling with?”

“The part we’re having trouble with is figuring out what’s best for the pack.” He thinks for a minute, trying to figure out the best way to explain. “Uh, our alphas are pretty great, they don’t just lay down the law and expect us to follow blindly.” Wonder what that’s like. “But once they do make their decision, that’s it. I’m the one making my case for my side, and I only get one chance.”

One chance at what? I find myself forgetting about my food and drawn into his story.

”We have a problem,” he says. “If we keep fighting and trying to solve this problem and failing, we might lose everything. If we admit defeat, we’ll still lose a lot. Too much, some say, but the pack will survive together and we’ll be able to start over somewhere else. So, that’s the question. Do we give up our home to save the pack, or do we fight for what’s ours and risk it all?”

”Which group are you in?”

”I say we stay and keep fighting. All we need is one solid lead, the right piece of the puzzle and we’re back in business.” He sighs. “But if we never get that... we can’t continue like we are much longer. My alphas are my—” he coughs. “Well, I’m really close to them and I know they want to stay and keep fighting. But they have to consider what’s best for the pack, even if it means something no one likes.”

“So, if surviving together is better than the pack falling apart, then they have to decide how much they’re willing to risk and when it’s time to walk away.”

”Exactly.”

His pack is facing a big decision and he’s trying to make his voice heard. He hopes what he thinks is the right thing will really help the pack and not doom them all. I’m strangely honored he trusted me with this. It sounds like a heavy burden to bear alone. That’s why he needed a break and proposed this night off with me.

We sit in silence for a few moments, thinking over everything we revealed.

”So,” I speak up. “I have my whole future on my shoulders, which includes my family’s legacy, and you have the future of your whole family and whole pack on your shoulders. No wonder we needed a break.”

He looks at me with a strange expression. Then he shakes his head and laughs. “Yeah, pretty much.”

I raise my drink cup and knock it against his in a toast. “We’re quite the pair.”

“Cheers.” He knocks his drink against mine in return.

Now that we’ve shared what brought us here and voiced some of our troubles, they do feel farther away. Ewan’s slouched in his chair, comfortable. I try to stuff down the faint glow of pride in my chest thinking that I helped just by agreeing to this night off with him.

“This isn’t how I pictured getting away for the night,” he says. “But I’m glad we did this.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah, I planned on shifting and running. That’s the good thing about being a werewolf,” he explains. “If human life becomes too much, you can take a break from everything cluttering up your brain. The wolf and the human are two sides of the same person, but each has its own priorities, so it’s like a different perspective. As a wolf, you care more about your immediate surroundings and what’s going on in front of you. It’s easy to lose yourself in the noise of the forest or wherever you’re at, to run and feel the air rush by. Nothing else matters.”

He looks at me, sees how captivated I am by him and the picture he paints, and lets out a dry chuckle. “That’s also how I ended up chasing a scent into a stranger’s yard and scaring you half to death.”

“Being a wolf sounds incredible,” I say softly.

“Yeah, it’s freeing.”

”That’s what I want,” I declare. “Freedom.”

”Okay.” He nods and reaches a decision, pushing his food away. “Here’s your chance. What would you do right now if you could do anything?”

“Anything?” I ask playfully. “What if I say we should shave our heads or jump off a bridge?”

His gaze is loaded, eyeing me like he’s trusting me with the weight of something monumental. “Anything.”

The decision suddenly seems so important. I suppose it is. It isn’t every day I take a break and enjoy doing something for myself. I can’t remember the last time it

happened. I can't turn into a wolf and run through the forest at night, howling at the full moon, but this is still some measure of freedom.

Before I start pondering my options, I realize I've already decided. The decision, it turns out, is simple.

"Oh, I know exactly what to do." I turn to him, now swept up in the possibilities. "And I need your help."

Ewan grins. "I was hoping you'd say that."

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Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:23 am

A hush falls over us as we walk through the campus. We end up in an empty lot behind the biology building. The university bought the property, tore down whatever old structure was there before, and now only dirt and earth remain, waiting for whatever shape the place takes next.

This is my night to go wild with earth magic. I know exactly what I want to accomplish.

“Where do you want this?” he asks quietly, holding up a bag of our supplies. The sunlight is quickly fading from the sky, but there’s enough light left to see his eyes widen. “Wait, I can talk, right?”

“Yes, why can’t you talk?”

“I don’t wanna mess up the spell,” he whispers, careful not to disturb the magic in his imagination.

“We haven’t cast anything yet,” I point out with amusement.

“Oh. Right.” Ewan clears his throat and coughs to cover his embarrassment. “Okay then. Carry on.”

Since he sensed my magic in the air when we met, he has more of an instinct for this than he realizes. I’m interested in seeing what he picks up on this time.

I’m interested in what we’ll do together.

The magical studies department suggested a garden for this land so all the wizarding students could understand how to properly care for and use natural ingredients. Others are lobbying for a parking lot because busy universities always need more parking.

Nobody is even clear if a garden can survive on this barren square of dirt and mud, so I'd like to find out with a practical demonstration.

Since I'm using my own materials and my efforts can be undone easily enough, there shouldn't be any problem. Us magical students are encouraged to find opportunities to practice our abilities while also abiding by basic rules of common courtesy. One professor sums up this philosophy as 'practice where ye can, but don't be an asshole about it.'

I'm ready and eager to get started. Ewan is...

"Are you sure about this?" he asks.

Ewan is less ready.

"Are you having second thoughts?"

"I don't know. Isn't doing too much magic, you know, dangerous?" He whispers again, but this time it comes from a place of concern for me. "Can't you get hurt?"

Now I hold back a smile. Ewan isn't questioning my abilities. If he isn't familiar with practicing magic, of course he isn't familiar with how novice casters work. He's worried about me and wants to make sure I'll be okay.

I unlink the keyring from my belt and hold it up for him to see. "Unbranded casters use tokens to safely practice magic. Tokens contain a small amount of elemental

power blessed by a branded person. This lets us safely harness some of an element's power."

Ewan shines the light of his phone over the string of my tokens, bobbing his head and inspecting them all.

After a moment of hesitation, I take one charm off the keyring. Nobody except for me touches my tokens, but Ewan is helping me out here and deserves to have his concerns addressed. I place the petal token in his outstretched hand. He gasps, either feeling something there or from the contact of our palms.

The dusty pink, perfectly preserved rose blossom is one of the earth tokens I use. He traces over it reverently.

"The tokens assist us, but there are also safeguards in place to prevent us from going too far."

"There are?" Ewan lets out a deep breath, relaxing at that.

"Protection rituals are done when one exhibits magical potential or at birth in some cases." I smile. "My protections were put in place shortly after I was born, since I'm from a magical family. They kick into gear and inhibit our powers if we start extending ourselves and our bodies farther than we can handle."

The tokens and the safeguards work together, giving a caster enough power to safely practice and learn while preventing them from overextending themselves. The effectiveness of this system weakens around middle age, but I have many years ahead before worrying about that.

"The protections will kick in if I come close to getting hurt," I continue. "Plus, the moon is out—"

“The moon makes me stronger,” he objects. “Not you.”

“Your strength makes me stronger.”

Wolves go hand in hand with howling at the full moon, though the truth is that wolves can be connected to the land they roam just as closely. Given that Ewan works with his hands and natural materials, given that he spends time running through the forest on all fours, and given that sensing my earth magic caused him to find me... I just know this wolf in particular has a strong tie to the earth too.

“We can do this,” I say. “I can do this.”

He must see the conviction on my face and he sighs. “You are sure of this. Aren’t you, Jack? Why are you so sure?”

“You asked what I’d do if I could do anything.” I shrug, not knowing how else to explain it. “This is my choice.”

If we’d known each other longer than a day, he might be stiff competition for what I desire most from a night of freedom. Heck, we’ve known each other less than a day and he’s already in second place. This dream of exploring earth magic has been in my heart for longer, so it’s clearer. If this night is all I get, I have to try and fulfill it.

“Alright,” Ewan says eventually. “Let’s do this.”

Ewan has a flashlight in his toolbox, and we need it and our phones for light as night falls. We set up a workspace and get busy preparing our ingredients and going through the necessary steps of a magical ritual for growth. The magical routine grounds me, rooted in the same principles that I’ve been around and known as long as I’ve known my own name.

We designate and mark off an area to concentrate on when directing the magic, a square patch of dirt that will become our garden. In no time at all, it's time to work my magic, literally.

Gathering my ring of tokens from my pocket, I hold the pebble charm in my hand and call the earth to me. The pebble symbolizes rock and earth, used when working with the land itself.

"Now we're starting," I say with a smile.

Ewan only nods solemnly.

I feel a sensation, a faint vibration when the ground responds to me. We reach out to each other.

Ewan can't see the magic, but he can sense it. I feel him perk up and track it. My power flows towards him, questioning, and he accepts it. His support rushes towards me, a raw shock of potential.

"Woah," he sways backward as he adjusts to the feeling of supporting my spell.

I pull up a massive chunk of dirt, going much too deep into the ground. The piece of earth rises up in the air. It lifts high enough to block out the moon from view. Shafts of moonlight peek through as the dirt breaks up in pieces and falls back down.

"Oops," I duck my head, bashful. "A little overeager there."

"That's a good sign, right? We go together well?"

"Y-yeah." Casting with him doesn't feel the same as anyone I've worked with before.

Ewan's presence is warm and open, inviting me in. The combination of us together is a bit addicting. We till and prepare the soil easily.

"Will you help?" I offer him a packet of seeds next.

"Sure. I'm not afraid of getting my hands dirty."

We plant the seeds the old-fashioned way, by hand one by one. Touching them and connecting with them will only help when we add magic later.

Planting and working at night isn't the norm but we manage together easily. We respond to each other well and can coordinate our efforts with just a few words. We make a good team. I'm even more excited to see what grows if this keeps up.

"Now we need a little water."

Ewan looks up to the sky. "Doesn't look like rain."

Apparently he still isn't used to someone with the elements at their command. I smile as I grab the token around my neck.

Ice comes from water, though each is treated as its own magical discipline. One is flowing and liquid, the other solid and stable. Two different styles of magic that attract two different types of caster.

Still, the ice token lets me channel both. The token itself looks like a large snowflake and is made of ice that never melts. My parents created it themselves. The full blessing of the element is a privilege every hopeful must learn for themselves, but as my parents both have ice essence inside them, some ice is in my veins. Not enough for a brand, the ice's potential is basically a token I carry in my blood. The snowflake token itself is symbolic, a talisman to focus on.

“Whoa, Jack. That’s enough water!”

The water flows so easily, only my reacting in time prevents a flood. Sometimes getting another element to react when a different element features more predominantly in a spell is challenging, but the water responds to me almost as naturally as ice.

Once the seeds are planted and watered, it’s time for them to grow.

“Here goes nothing.”

With my final earth token, a small seed, I give the final commands. “Take root. Grow.”

A branded wizard needs no tokens. They carry all the necessary tools inside them. Novices receive basic training tokens for learning and practicing. Since I never formally focused on studying earth magic or found a sponsorship, I have three relatively weak training tokens for the earth.

If I practiced earth magic more or earned stronger tokens, would something be happening right now?

“Take root,” I say again. “Grow.”

The breathless silence extends while we wait. Nothing happens. Why isn’t anything happening?

I pour more power into the earth. I start to sweat and pant as I work harder.

There’s no warning tug from the protections wrapping around my body and soul, so I’m not in any immediate danger of hurting myself. If I keep working this hard

without success, however, I will reach a breaking point soon.

No, this is my chance to work earth magic. I can't fail. I keep pouring myself into the spell and hitting resistance.

Ewan clears his throat. "Are you okay?"

Ewan. I try drawing strength from him. He should compensate for what I lack, but nothing happens. My tokens are becoming hot in my hand, doing all they can.

"Jack, talk to me. Are you alright?"

"I'll be fine," I insist, not letting the interruption stop me. This is my chance to create something beautiful. And if I can't, I should at least be able to do something.

"Can I help?" Ewan asks quietly.

The question confuses me for a moment. "Are you asking to help or asking whether you're capable of helping?"

"Uh, both?" He chuckles weakly. "Let me try to help, at least."

"Okay."

He steps closer and offers me his hand. My heart beats harder in my chest, but this is just for practical purposes. Not surprising that a shifter needs skin to skin contact. His connection to the earth and the warm presence of the man next to me threaten to distract me terribly.

Ewan nods, like he's confirming his suspicions. "Okay, correct me if I'm wrong here, but I get the sense you're telling the seeds what to do."

“Yeah. They won’t grow in an instant on their own.”

“But they will grow,” he reminds me gently. “In time. That’s the cool thing about the earth. It follows natural cycles of life. It already knows what to do, so you don’t have to direct it. Everything will happen naturally. All you need to do is give it some power to speed things up.”

“Oh.” I take his suggestion and already it feels like the wall I’ve been running into has melted away. “I, I see what you mean.”

“You’re doing great,” he assures warmly. “I think we can manage together.”

I feel foolish but can’t give up when met with his honest encouragement and support. Honestly, his suggestion has put everything into perspective.

My mindset and powers revolve around working with ice. Ice magic is all about setting things up right. You set the conditions for the element to thrive and then give it form and structure. Then you carefully watch over the ice you created. If you aren’t paying attention, ice can crack and melt. It’s all about control.

Nature is different. It can grow and thrive anywhere without help from us at all.

I do as Ewan says. Instead of directing the seeds, I give them warmth and rich soil and everything they need to come alive. Plus, a little magic to speed up the process. The power flows from Ewan into me. I direct the energy to the ground and the seeds waiting there in the dark. Then I let nature run its course from there and trust.

We wait in expectant silence, for minutes or seconds, who knows. Then...

“Holy crap,” he breathes.

My eyes are closed, I realize, so I open them. Darkness greets me. His phone has gone dark and the light of the moon isn't showing me anything out of the ordinary.

When he provides light once more, I'm not sure what I should be seeing. I have to kneel down and look very carefully. The little sprout is hidden in the dirt, barely there. I finally see it and don't believe my eyes. I wonder if it's a mistake. Was it already there?

The sprout lengthens a fraction, a small green wisp emerging from the dirt. It's real. And growing. We did that. The sprout we planted minutes ago is growing. Our magic allowed it to happen almost instantly.

"Whoa... we did it?"

"I had no doubt," Ewan says. "Well, my understanding of magic is a bit iffy, but I believed in you."

That tiny little blade is the most beautiful thing I've ever seen. I stand to share my excitement with Ewan—everything changes. Like a secret switch flips or the last invisible piece of the puzzle falls into place. Everything comes together and the magic takes root.

Everything starts growing.

The garden grows around us. Grass sprouts and takes over the plot of dirt, so rapidly a blade sneaks in under the cuff of my pants and tickles my ankle. Plants follow with leaves and stems and green buds that bloom in an instant.

A garden of blue, purple, and pink plants surge to life around us. I reach out and the petals are soft and waxy against my fingers. They're real. It's like we stumbled onto a teeming garden that's been growing for years. The floral scent fills my nose and

smells sweeter than ever.

“We, we did it,” I laugh shakily. “It, it’s... amazing.”

“Beautiful,” he agrees.

Ice magic comes naturally to me, the earth’s power more foreign. I’ve always imagined earth magic could be rather glorious when done right.

I’ve just never felt it myself. Not until now.

Could I have this all the time? Is this some incredible fluke? Maybe only the man I’m casting with makes it so incredible?

“I didn’t—” My words come out in a whisper, and I try again, speaking up to be heard. “I didn’t know it could be like this. Is this, do you...”

“Yeah, I know this feeling. It’s like pack and home, alive and warm and vibrant.”

“It’s amazing. I’m so used to... cold.”

Ewan and I are standing close, closer than I realized. He reaches out and barely needs to move forward to brush his hand against my face. “You feel warm to me.”

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Doing magic with my werewolf partner in crime is a resounding success. Afterwards, Ewan's hand cups my cheek, his touch warm and steady.

"You're touching my face," I whisper.

"I am." He's hushed too. The moment feels important. "Should I stop?"

Neither of us pulls away. Neither of us want to. We're standing in the instant garden we created together with my magic and his connection to the earth. Surrounded by flowers and wild grass that tickles my ankles. All around us is proof of how well we work together. A beautiful fragrant garden of sensation, and it's only the beginning. We could have more.

"No, don't stop," I answer his question. "But I'm not sure what to do now."

"Oh, I've got some ideas." Our position means I block the moon's light from hitting his eyes, but I know they're glittering with the possibilities. "Guessing you do too."

"But can we, can we really...?"

"We agreed to a night of fun," he reminds gently.

"Right, no strings attached." Which has a new meaning now. "I know how it sounds, but I wasn't aware sex was part of the arrangement."

"Me neither." He flashes me a smile. "Honestly, I kind of hoped so. What about you?"

"Uh, I..." I'm torn between putting distance between us or burying my face into his shoulder. If he's trying to fluster me, he succeeds. "Do I need to give you the 20 dollars back?"

"Keep it," he says. "Will it buy me an answer?"

Seeing his entire body naked when we met means that it's impossible to ignore how attractive he is and how my body responds to the idea of him undressed.

He's sexy. Part of me wanted to sleep with Ewan as soon as he appeared in human form after visiting my garden. The desire has only grown as I get to know him better. He's friendly and kind. Ewan reminds me of the best of earth magic, alive, rooted, and full of possibilities.

"Y-y-yeah," I force out the quiet admission. "I hoped we'd get here too. But that was just based on..."

"On?"

"Your body. Now I wanna sleep with you." The kind, steady man who holds me in his arms so securely. Oh god, that sounds overboard. "Too much?"

"Just enough," he decides, gently grabbing my hands. "Look, we can make this complicated or we can just go with it."

He's right. Despite the doubt, I told myself to accept his offer and see where a night with him leads me. There's no regrets about my decision. Our magic was successful, and we work well together. This feels right, so why should we deny ourselves?

All I have to do is give myself permission to go after what I want, to go after him.

"One night," I say. "You and me. There's nothing stopping us, except us."

"I'm in if you are," Ewan says.

I press my lips to his and pull back with a smile. "I'm so in."

The next moments are a blur. Once we establish we're both on the same page and ready to continue, we can't get somewhere private fast enough. We rush to his truck and don't stop touching each other for even a second. I sit in the middle seat of the cab instead of the passenger seat so our sides rest against each other. His hand lands on my thigh whenever we stop at a light on the drive.

We rent a room at a nearby hotel to spend the night together, and I press myself into Ewan's back, basically hiding from the clerk at the reception desk. Given my hands are still wrapped around Ewan's waist, the guy knows I'm there.

There's no reason to be ashamed. The place isn't a motel, and certainly not a dive or a sketchy by the hour establishment. But there's too many desires running around in my mind and I'm sure anyone who looks at my face will see them all. I can hardly wait. We'll have a room to ourselves until whatever time check out is tomorrow. That makes me dizzy with the possibilities.

A tasteful, impersonal room soon greets us. The door clicks shut and we're alone. My body moves on its own, bridging the small distance between us as he turns to do the same.

We stumble into the wall and don't let up, kissing in a frenzy. He ends up against the wall, so I follow and put my body against his. My hands are on his face, grazing against the faint stubble on his jaw. He starts shrugging out of his flannel shirt so I help him and then my hands must drag over his arms and enjoy his biceps, which flex and move as he gets distance and pulls off his V-neck, and then my hands and mouth

are trying to get as much as they can of his muscles and warm skin.

He wraps his arms around me, using both hands to grab my ass and drag me back into him. We're both getting hard in our pants. I feel his length and instinctively roll my hips into his and he groans and pants against my neck. I mean to keep exploring his chest and flat stomach, to curl my fingers into the light-colored patch of hair in the center of his chest, but then he starts kissing and nipping my neck and I find it hard to concentrate.

I pull back and watch as he takes in my flushed face and kiss bitten lips. I'm positive no one has ever stared at me with such hunger. He follows me as I lead us to the bed, growling into the space between my neck and shoulder as he catches me from behind and drags me back. "Where do you think you're going?"

"The bed? The bed is—oh."

Ewan bites at my skin and makes it impossible to keep talking. When I basically melt into his arms, his lips press in near my collarbone and he nips and drags his teeth there. It's like a livewire jolting right through me. My cock throbs and I don't even try to be sexy. I separate from him in order to follow through on my plan, getting us both to the bed and naked. I fling off my shirt and start kicking off my pants and we both race to get undressed.

Throwing most of my clothes off without worry for where they land and making a mess isn't like me, but Ewan is much more important than neatness in this instance. The only part that requires some care is my elemental keyring. I place it gently in the drawer of the nightstand nearest to me. I'm a firm believer that elements respect the people who respect them and treat them with the reverence they deserve.

Non-casters don't always understand, but Ewan watches with a fond smile like he gets it. And I thought needing him more was impossible.

The bed turns out to be a wise decision. I make the mistake of looking at him too soon and then I stop functioning and stumble, falling down onto the mattress which breaks my fall. I've already seen him naked, but the sight still stuns me. I can't believe that I get to do more than just look.

The wiry golden hairs on his arms aren't extremely visible nor is the patch of hair on his chest, but I feel it against my skin when he joins me on the bed. He feels so good against me, and I drag my hands over as much of him as I can, hardly knowing where to focus first.

Then he's gone a second later and I'm tempted to pout. He's back after picking up the bag of items he bought from a convenience store near the hotel. "Should check, do you want condoms?"

"Uh, what? What?"

He stands in front of the bed, putting his hardness right around my eye level. His cock looks heavy and red against the blond patch of hair at his groin. My mouth goes dry.

Ewan waves a hand in front of my face. "Condoms?"

Thinking clearly is challenging at the moment, but I do my best. "Shifters are their own type of magical being. They have stronger immune systems and aren't susceptible to the same illnesses as humans and can't spread the same things either. A shifter only poses risks to another shifter."

"And us wizards are basically regular humans," I ramble on as I think out loud. "Until we take the brand. Though in certain cases, exposure to an element results in superficial changes before branding." I give him a wry smile and pat the top of my head. "Which is why I have never ever dyed my naturally black hair and yet it's pure white." The same shock of white as both my parents.

I've never thought it suited me but at least Ewan seems to like it. His fingers curl in the strands at the back of my head as he presses light kisses against my jaw. He seems unable to stop touching me entirely. He's incredible and I like this, I like having nothing between us. Oh right, that answers that question.

"No, no condoms is fine. Um, did you bring—"

My request is cut off. I shudder when his palm cups me near the base of my erection and stops all my thoughts. His fingers wrap around my length, and he slowly moves his hand up like he's experimenting, trying to get a feel for me and the best way to touch me. I rock into him, needing more. His hand is slick and glides over me easily, wet with the lube I'd been trying to ask about.

"I've got it covered." He looks smug about that, and I can't argue.

And he covers me a second later, moving us both down on the bed. He settles over me, and my hand immediately sneaks down between us to feel his hardness, but he beats me to it. He wraps a hand around us both and starts stroking and we both groan. He uses a steady, measured pace, but it's nearly too much because he's right there with me.

"Come here," I demand.

He lifts his head, our mouths find each other, falling open as our tongues tangle in the same rhythm, even but insistent.

I rock into him as his tempo finally increases and then we both start moving together and flying towards our release.

I wonder if we'll come at the same time, spurting together over our cocks, and mixing in a wonderful mess over our stomachs. I need that with a ferocity that feels almost

lupine like him. This is more than enough to get me off just like this, it's amazing, but I can't help being greedy. I have to speak.

"Please don't stop."

"Not planning on it," he grunts.

"C-cool, I'm just saying that in advance because I also need to ask something."

"We're doing 20 questions now?" he grits out, struggling to focus on a conversation, which is so hot that I have this effect on him.

"Only one question! We said one night together. That's different than one round, right?"

"Oh yeah," he says without hesitation. "Lots and lots more rounds, all the rounds."

"Great. Just checking. Because I really need you to fuck me. That can wait until later! Hey, don't stop, I clearly said don't stop."

Yet he is and rolling away too, the exact opposite of my pleas.

"You take over." He's feeling around on the bed, looking for something. "Where'd that lube go?"

Oh. While I hated to stop the fun, we promised ourselves one night of each other. I had to clarify we wouldn't be calling it a night after we came once. Because we can't go our separate ways without me knowing what his cock feels like inside me. Apparently, he appreciated my idea and is being so thoughtful to soothe my fears. We won't be letting up anytime soon because he's getting the lube so he can get me ready for next time.

With me taking over, I nearly moan aloud when I realize I get to be the one to take us over the edge, that I get to make Ewan come.

I commit myself fully to the task.

We maneuver so that I'm straddling Ewan and have access to both our erections while he can reach around me when he's done slicking up his fingers.

Even though we're about the same height, I spend my days around old books and other future wizards in classrooms while he spends his days working with his hands and building things. His hand fit us both but mine falls a bit short. I'm not even embarrassed to use both hands to get the best grip as I work with single-minded focus.

He approves or at least part of him does because I feel his cock throb next to mine and his hand falls heavily on my backside where it journeys to my hole.

"Aren't you glad I suggested this after all?"

"Good call," he agrees huskily. "Such a great call."

I bite my lip to hold back an extremely undignified noise when his thumb traces my rim. I wouldn't call myself someone who has enough sex to really develop a preference for topping, bottoming, or both. Quick handjobs with the handful of harried wizarding hopefuls I tried to date for a month or two before it fizzled out were pretty standard. Ewan is showing me just how inadequate those experiences were.

Taking a bit of time and really enjoying someone else's body is incredible, especially when the body belongs to the strapping wolf shifter in bed with me. The sudden visceral need to have him inside me was almost surprising. But as Ewan lifts one globe of flesh in his hand, spreading me open with gentle precision, I know I made

the right choice.

"Fuck, Jack," he groans, his voice rough and full of desire.

One slick finger teases its way inside me. My body responds immediately, pushing into the digit with one breath and then into the motion of my hands around us. My hips rock against him in a desperate attempt for more contact.

"More," I whimper, arching my back to give him better access.

I need so much more. Like rounds two, three, and four worth of more.

When it comes to round one, however, I'm reaching my breaking point. I do my best to keep stroking and to bring him over with me too.

We groan and pant into each other's mouths as we do indeed find our release together. His cock pulses in my hand, hot liquid coating my palm, and if I wasn't already coming, that would have done it.

My orgasm hits me hard, just as steady and forceful as the rhythm he set up, washing over every part of me and not letting up until the end.

We come down and catch our breath together. His fingers have stopped their journey inside me, but not retreated, just paused. The hand cupping my ass has relaxed yet still holds on loosely in an almost proprietary gesture.

We don't move away from each other. Clearly, we aren't done yet, just taking a moment until we're ready to continue. I'm not thinking of much. Anything I am thinking about lies on this bed with me.

So, it takes a moment to place the odd musical sound that starts up somewhere in the

room. A phone.

“Ignore it,” Ewan says.

“And I totally will, after I ask why your ringtone is Hungry Like the Wolf.”

“Oh shit.” His eyes widen like this is a monumental revelation. “You’re right.”

”You didn”t know?”

”No, I knew. My sister did that.”

”Should I be offended you didn’t put your phone on silent?”

”I did, except for that number.” He doesn’t look happy about it, but he starts pulling away from me. “It’s never on silent because it’s the only call I can’t ever ignore. That number belongs to my alphas.”

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“Sorry,” Ewan says as he gets out of bed. “I need to take this.”

“Of course.”

He’s already out of the room and ducking into the bathroom a second later. The door closes behind him.

We agreed to spend the night together and I’m grateful we had the chance to be together once before the interruption. Of course, I can’t help reminding myself that neither of us wanted to stop at once.

Then Ewan’s alpha called. I pray it will be a mistake or a simple fix. That he’ll come back and we’ll finish what we started. Given his pack’s struggles and that they’re potentially on the brink of ruin, the chances of something easy seem slim.

Ewan emerges a few moments later. Still naked, he hadn’t stopped to put on clothes. I’m not looking at his body for once. I stare at his face. He stops against the door, unsure how to proceed, and his face tells me all I need to know.

“You have to go, don’t you?”

“Sorry,” he says, not denying it. He has to go. “This isn’t what we planned.”

“No, there’s no need to apologize.” I try not to pout or show my disappointment. It can’t be helped. “If your pack needs you, you should go.”

Ewan sighs and starts moving towards the bed, searching for and collecting his

clothes while he goes. I watch as he puts on his shirt and bends down for his pants. I feel like I should be doing something, but I just lay in the sheets and watch him prepare to leave me behind.

We agreed to spend one night together, then go our separate ways. I'm not so sure that deal suits me anymore.

One night is nice and all, but what if I want more?

"Sorry," he says again. He does up the button on his jeans, patting his pockets to make sure his wallet is still there and hasn't fallen out. "I wish I could stay."

"Hey, duty calls."

"Doesn't mean we have to like it." His regret is clear, which is nice, but does us no good.

I summon a weak smile. "Pack comes first. Right? I assume."

"Pack comes first in many cases," he agrees slowly, watching me with an unreadable expression.

"Then you can't keep your alphas waiting, not on my account."

A one-night stand is definitely not something that comes before pack. That would encourage wolves to think with the equipment in their pants instead of their brains. A long-term partner, however, I wonder if that's one of the exceptions that a wolf is allowed to put first once in a while. But we aren't that.

Ewan hovers near the foot of the bed. "So, I guess this is goodbye."

“I guess so.”

This is it, isn't it? Last chance. Come on, Jack, I tell myself. Ask to see him again. Get his number, anything.

I knew this moment was coming. I just thought I'd have more time. Time to figure out what to do. I need more time.

I expected a whole night where I could build up my nerve. A night to debate all the options and talk myself in and out of what to do a thousand times, to study him and guess what he's thinking and feeling and how likely it is he laughs in my face.

I felt bolder in his arms. I was able to act freely and go after him and do what I wanted. But now I'm in bed alone and I feel like me again. Conflicted and anxious and unsure.

I don't know what to say. I can't say anything. I don't know what to do. I can't do anything.

Ewan doesn't say or do anything either. He just keeps getting farther away. Surely if he felt the same, he wouldn't be tongue tied and fumbling like me. He'd go after what he desires, he...

Ewan stops by the door and my heart leaps in my chest. One last opportunity. He'll take it. He has to.

“By the way, it looks good,” he murmurs.

“Huh?”

“Natural,” he says. “You look good natural.”

Then the door opens and he slips away. He's gone.

Alone in the room, I stare after him, unable to move. I puzzle through what just happened. Is the last thing he said to me that I look good naked? Odd. Those words are more suited to the heat of passion than a parting line. That can't be right. Did I hear him wrong?

I'm not sure about what he said, but what happened is much easier to figure out. I let him leave. He left. He's gone.

I struggled with indecision. I wanted to ask for his number, but I wasn't sure it was the right decision. Once he's gone it seems so clear. I'm an idiot. I should have said something.

"I'm an idiot," I tell the empty room and bury my face in a pillow.

If we'd had more than one night, if we got to know each other better and explored what was between us more... I can't help feeling like it might have lasted much more than one night. Or two.

Maybe, just maybe, it might have been so much more. I just lost the opportunity to find out and now... It's over before it even began. I don't even know what I've missed out on. Will I always wonder what could have been?

Maybe nothing. I reassure myself. Maybe this was the best it would ever get with him, one night. Maybe I lost nothing at all.

The doubt is still there in the back of my mind. Or what if I just lost a chance at everything?

* * *

Two days after my great escape, nothing is back to normal yet.

Mother clears her throat and sends my father an important look over her coffee cup. “Tell yourson about the event today.”

“No, you tell your sonthat—”

“I can hear you,” I say. We all sit at the same breakfast table. “We all know I can hear you. Just tell me.”

...

Actually, one thing is back to normal after I went wild and enjoyed some freedom two days ago: me. I’m back to normal.

I admit I was emotional when the night with Ewan ended early and he unceremoniously walked out the door. Not getting his number seemed like a colossal mistake and I got sentimental, beating myself up about this grand romance we could have had.

In the light of day the next morning, after caffeine and breakfast, I saw how silly and sentimental I acted. Our one-night stand wasn’t the start of some epic love affair. It was only marking the end of one chapter and the start of another. I had a night to experience all the wonders of earth magic and now it was all out of my system. Now I could commit to ice with no regrets.

...And when it comes to Ewan, what other choice is there? I have to move on and tell myself it meant nothing since I won’t be seeing him again.

Father breaks the silence. “Please remind yourson that it’s rude to interrupt people when they’re talking.”

“Only if you tell him that it’s rude to break appointments the day of with no warning or even an apology.”

Technically, I blew off a meeting set up on my behalf, not one I agreed to. Committing someone to an event without even telling them beforehand also seems like a violation of, if not decorum, then at least common courtesy.

Even though the set up happened without any input from me whatsoever, I still tried to apologize to Percy Brass for standing him up. I’ve been calling him and left a few messages, but he clearly doesn’t care to mend fences.

Clearly, we aren’t meant to be.

My breakfast is already getting cold. Frost lines the walls in the dining room, even encroaching onto the ancestral portraits of past Blanchard icebrands, so it’s important to eat quickly while the food is warm without eating so quickly that you demonstrate bad table manners.

I push my plate away and give up on breakfast. “Okay, we need to talk.”

My parents acting oblivious was amusing at first. Sitting at opposite ends of the long dining table, they literally have to overlook me here in the middle to ignore me. But surely it’s better to just deal with this, no beating around the bush.

“Look, I know my behavior was childish.” I speak to the tops of my mother and father’s heads in turn as they continue the silent treatment. “I shouldn’t have run off. I felt overwhelmed, like you’d already picked out china patterns for my nuptials with Percy Brass.”

“It was a lunch date,” Mother says. “We weren’t asking you to walk down the aisle.”

“It didn’t feel like just lunch. Once we met, you’d expect me to see him again, wouldn’t you? And if we didn’t hit it off, I worried he would only be the first in a long line of suitors.” I sigh. “I handled the situation poorly and should have just been honest about my reservations. Excuse me.”

I stand from the table after excusing myself but find I’m not quite done. “Keep in mind, freezing someone out is a bit too effective if you two are the ones doing the freezing out. I’m liable to get hypothermia and end up in the hospital.”

I expect another round of frosty silence, but after only a quick wordless exchange between the two of them, Father dabs his mouth with a napkin and clears his throat to speak.

“Yes, perhaps we owe you an apology too. We don’t like being embarrassed... and it’s possible we aren’t acting maturely either.”

“Oh,” I say. It’s all I can say. Are they... sharing responsibility for this fiasco?

“The setup was quite... sudden,” Mother agrees. “No wonder you felt cornered, like we expected you to partner with ice and this man at the same time and it was already a done deal.”

“The thought did cross my mind,” I admit.

Father only nods. “We understand if it seemed...”

“Cold?” I suggest.

“Clinical,” he offers instead.

“More direction in your personal life should help guide your element as well,”

Mother adds. “We were only making a suggestion. This man, he’s only an option, not set in ice.”

“Stone is the expression.”

Mother scoffs. “Ice is better.”

“We need to make sure you’re motivated towards branding,” Father adds. “Before you know it, it will be too late.”

I laugh. “I’m in my early 20s.”

“The time goes quickly. Hesitate too long and it only becomes more difficult.”

“We’ve seen it happen,” father adds quietly. “You do have time to meet the right man. The elements, however, only offer opportunities for so long.”

Their implications are more chilling than the dining room and their cold shoulder put together. Protections and tokens only keep casters safe for so long. Decades of casting without a true partnership to an element start outweighing the effectiveness of a token’s blessing. A brand will take care of the problem. But novice casters who reach middle age start exhibiting a host of warning signs, like a sickness that has physical and magical symptoms to name one example. Like a fire magic user in bed with a fever that starts burning the sheets and the pillow.

If a caster is at risk of permanent damage and can’t secure a brand, their powers are bound and the caster is permanently cut off from magic for their own safety.

Working so hard for decades, being so close to magic, and then never merging with an element? It sounds like a nightmare. Not really something us novices enjoy thinking about.

“We’re only trying to look out for your best interests,” Father says. “But we know you need to follow your heart too.”

I smile. “Thank you. It means so much to hear you say that.”

“Percy and his family are coming to dinner tonight,” Mother informs me. “It should be an opportunity to patch things up without any pressure for you and Percy to hit it off.”

“I’ll be there,” I promise.

”Will you assist us in creating the centerpiece for tonight?” Dad wonders as they begin rising from the table.

Breakfast gets cleared away to make room for us to work around the table. My parents occasionally make ice sculptures for centerpieces when hosting company, especially when hosting non-icy guests. They’re always impressed by the unique creations, limited time art that only invited guests have the pleasure of viewing.

My parents stand on opposite sides of the antique table, the glowing snowflakes brands shining on their arms even through their shirts. Ice magic flows from their palms, swirling together to create a massive block of ice in the middle of the table.

We’ve done this before, so I look to them for direction in what we’re carving.

“This time, we’ll follow your direction,” Mother declares.

“R-really?” They’ve never done this before.

Father nods. “Start carving.”

We really have reached a new understanding. Finally, they see me as an adult. I'm excited to take the lead and show them what I can do. A shape forms in my mind and I call the magic to me, ready to start changing the block of ice.

When I try to use my powers, nothing happens.

"Are you not feeling well?"

"Do you have your token? It may be symbolic, but you always cast with it. Altering your ritual can cause hiccups."

"No, I'm fine," I rush to say before they ask more questions. "Sorry. Give me a second." I take a deep breath.

My hands tremble, the pressure mounting as I attempt to channel my magic into the frozen block before me. The ice remains unaffected, taunting me with its unblemished surface.

I'm bothered enough I even start thinking icy thoughts. Cold winds, the biting chill of winter nights, the gentle caress of snowflakes against my skin. Despite my best efforts, the ice remains untouched, my magic failing me once again.

Ice magic has always been within me. What's going on?

"Are any of your powers working?"

I pull out my ring of tokens. Casting anything else in here surrounded by ice always takes considerable effort, but I don't feel even a twinge of power as my fingers land on tokens. No wind, no sun, no flames. I move on to electricity, the air around me crackling with tension, but yet again, I fail.

Then I hit the seed token for earth magic and it flares up. Before I even realize what I'm doing, I reach out towards the walls, and vines erupt from the plaster. Twisting and turning, they stretch out along the walls, not even bothered by all the ice in the room.

I can still do earth magic. Only earth magic. My parents realize at the same moment as me. They are not pleased.

"What's going on, Jackson?" Mother demands.

"Are you trying to become an earthbrand?" Father questions.

"Without even telling us?" Mother demands next.

I wish they'd go back to giving me the silent treatment.

"I didn't," I whisper. "I didn't pledge to anything."

"We should have known something was wrong. Look at his hair."

"I can't, I can't even look at it."

Yet she does, they both do, glaring at the top of my head.

Oh. I suppose I'm not entirely back to normal. I've almost forgotten my hair is black because it's been icy white for as long as I can remember. Being around ice magic turns my hair the same stark white as my parents.

"Do you think I wanted to have white hair in my twenties?" Mom rants. "This look takes some getting used to, but we wear it with pride. We thought you did too."

“I was the only six-year-old in my first-grade class with pure white hair! If that doesn’t show pride, I don’t know what does.” I was the only child in the whole school with white hair. Mine was whiter than even the oldest teachers. Mother told me that physical changes like this signified a close relationship with an element and that was something to be proud of. “My hair just turned white one day. And a few days ago, it turned back to its regular color. There’s nothing wrong with it. It’s natural.”

”Is that what you want?” Mother demands. “To be natural instead of magical? To be ordinary?”

”Well, no,” I say. Natural doesn’t sound very nice the way she puts it, but I can’t help remembering how Ewan said it. He turned from the hotel door with a soft smile just to compliment my hair. That’s what Ewan meant when he said I looked good natural. He liked my hair natural. I had no idea what he meant until I finally looked in a mirror and saw the color of my hair had changed.

”This won’t do at all,” Mother protests.

“Earth,” scoffs Father. “You can’t align yourself with earth magic.”

”What? Why not?” I ask, trying not to panic.

“Earth is among the most common brands. Can you really compete with all the other casters?” Mom stops, unable to go on. They both stop pacing and turn to me with stricken expressions. “No, we’re getting ahead of ourselves. It comes down to this. Are you honestly telling us this is your choice? That earth is right for you. You’re giving up the ice and going after an earthbrand? Is that your decision?”

“Well...” I’m torn. Unsure how to explain, all I can do is answer the question. “No, not exactly.”

My magic is showing a preference, but I can't say I've decided, that it's over and a done deal. I haven't reached a decision.

But my parents act like my answer is a decision in itself.

"Exactly. Why turn your back on ice?" Mother drifts back to her place at the table. "You're a Blanchard, that means something. You're our heir. The Blanchard heir is always an icebrand. Can you imagine how many generations of traditions another brand would destroy?"

"Get this out of your system and fast!" Father orders, his voice like a glacier's edge. "Be here tonight for our dinner party, with your ice abilities operational."

Their anger and panic only makes me more distressed and I rush out of the dining room with my head spinning. I thought we made progress and yet they went right back to demanding things and judging me... and I went right back to listening to them, on autopilot.

The easiest way to view my night with Ewan is that it was a way to blow off steam and get earth magic out of my system.

My magic, however, isn't letting what happened that night go so easily. It clings to the earth magic, which obviously means something. But right now, my parents' wrath has me springing into action and rushing off to fix everything. I have to figure out why my magic is stuck in earth and undo it. Then... I have no idea. I'll start there.

The rest is much more complicated.

Apparently, my parents and I didn't reach the understanding I thought we did. They told me to follow my heart. I can pick my man, not my element. The rest is set in stone—no, set in ice.

There's only one option for my element. Ice.

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Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:23 am

I rush out of the house in a state of total panic and confusion. What in the world is happening?

It felt like we were turning a corner and my parents were going to respect my choices. The peace barely lasted five minutes. I'm surprised I could even run out of there after the nasty case of whiplash they inflicted.

The chill from inside follows me even when I reach the part of the lawn no longer under icy influence. What's going on with my powers?

I reach into my pocket, feeling a spark against my fingers when I find the fire token first. There's a patch of light on the grass lit up by the early morning sun. I aim there. "Ignite."

Nothing happens.

What the un-frosty hell is going on?

Studying for decades without any indication from the elements can be extremely frustrating. One sign an element has taken notice or is seriously considering a person is if their powers get stuck on one element. However, other factors can cause this too. Like if you start casting with one element much more than the others, or when one token or magical tool overpowers the rest.

Has Earth noticed me? I have the overall magical knowledge and skills required for a brand, but honestly? I can't say I measure up otherwise. I don't feel grounded and sure of what I'm after in any part of life... nor do I have the support of a loving

partner.

So, something else must be happening. Right?

“Come on, Earth,” I plead. “Fill me in here. What’s going on?” Anytime an element seems less like a force of nature and more like a being trying to express its own personality and views, we capitalize the name.

Earth does not give me an answer.

“I’m not ready,” I whisper. My journey out of the house brings me to my garden. I stop at the edge of the garden, suddenly feeling unable to continue.

What I told my parents was true. I didn’t expect this or try to make it happen. I’m almost as shocked as they are. I can’t really pledge myself to earth magic. Not like this, can I? I lack experience at earth magic... though it does feel somewhat natural, especially after Ewan helped put things in perspective for me when we created the garden. Still, I’m not in the right place and need more time to figure myself out, to think...

But isn’t that what I said when Ewan walked out the door too?

I told myself I couldn’t be sure about what I wanted and that I needed more time to sort my feelings out, but the second he left I knew I shouldn’t have let him go.

Escaping from my parents bought me some time, but there’s no running from whatever is happening. This situation is hardly ideal, but there is so much I need to figure out. Might as well start now.

Getting my full range of powers back comes first. Not only will that satisfy my parents, it also gives me exactly what I need: a reason to reach out to Ewan.

My hair changed colors after we slept together. That was the first sign of a magical reaction happening inside me. He's definitely part of all this. A magical reason to see him again makes it easier to reach out... even if the personal reasons are all I care about when thinking about his blue eyes and steady hands.

First, I need to find him.

I go past my garden and beyond the hedges to select a leaf from the tree we hid under together when we met. Placing the waxy leaf and the pressed flower token on top in my open palms, I focus on Ewan. How his body felt against mine, how his presence felt like a bright spring day and the rush of how our magic mixed together.

Where is Ewan?

I pour magic into the question and realize my eyes are closed. When I open them, the leaf's stem twitches. Then it lifts from my hands and floats in the air.

As if caught in an unseen wind, the leaf hovers and sways back and forth. The branches of the tree are still, no natural breeze in the air, so the spell is working.

A smile forms on my lips. Maybe this is a good thing. I have the chance to correct two mistakes. Gain some distance from earth magic and remove some distance between me and Ewan. I'll find him and deal with the magical quirks as they come.

The leaf jerks and zooms to the right. It found him. Now it's time to follow.

It takes the leaf and I a while to get coordinated. It wants to float off and have me walk behind it obediently. I don't know how far it's going, so I take my car. The leaf stays about the same speed even with wheels. I put my flashers on and break constantly as it starts and stops at a fairly slow pace.

“Keep going, you stupid leaf.”

A car honks behind me.

“Can’t you see the flashers? Go around.”

I grit my teeth and my knuckles are white around the steering wheel. I know where, to who, the leaf leads me towards. The anticipation is nearly unbearable.

It’s a long drive, longer than I expected and longer still with the supernatural compass. Once we head away from the city, natural forest starts beating out homes and storefronts. We arrive at a vacation area in the trees.

A secluded place with high-end vacation properties. A spacious and scenic natural landscape with some log cabin style houses that look more like mini-mansions. My guess is that Ewan’s pack lives out here or some do full time. If I’m at the location I think I am, then a few of my parent’s friends have cabins out here. Ewan clearly undersold how well his construction company does.

The leaf zooms ahead. I stomp on the gas, thankful I’m the only car on this stretch of road. When we reach the end of a gravel road that turns to dirt, the leaf drops to the ground. This is it.

Fresh air greets me as I step out of my vehicle, and I hear birdsong in the distance. Forest surrounds me, save for the land and a property far in the distance. The place looks like a natural paradise for wolves.

It really is beautiful out here. I get why a wolf or human would love cozying up among the trees and letting the fresh air lift their spirits. I feel a little calmer. The sun hits my face and I breathe it all in.

I travel the rest of the way by foot. Not dressed for a trek, sweat begins gathering under my shirt. I skirt closer to the edge of the nearest trees so they can provide shade.

Someone calls out to me. Unable to see them, I still raise a hand in greeting and smile. Maybe they know where Ewan is at.

Three people become visible up ahead. After only a few seconds, they were much closer than I expected. They're moving fast. What's the hurry? Maybe they're heading somewhere?

The three figures cut into the trees before we reach each other. Yep, they were heading somewhere. Oh well, surely there's someone else I can ask—

Three shapes suddenly leap from the shadows and land in front of me. Presumably the same three people I saw, only now one remains human and the other two are large, snarling wolves.

“H-hello, sorry if I’m disturbing you—”

My words die when two more wolves join the others. Two other humans are with them, but it really doesn't matter which form they take. Either way, I'm seriously outnumbered. Why does it feel like I'm being accosted by an angry mob?

“Stop right there.” The human at the front makes the order. He doesn't look much friendlier than his furry friends. He's snarling at me just like them with his fists clenched.

“I don't mean to trespass. I think this is the right place, but I don't see any clearly marked signs.” I chuckle nervously. They don't. “Um, I'm here to see if—”

“Save it,” growls the man. “We know exactly why you’re here.”

The guy leading the charge is a head shorter than me but three times my size. A few wolves are circling around and closing me in.

“I don’t want any trouble.”

The man’s grin looks sharp and cruel. “Too bad.”

Ah, that’s why it feels like I’m being accosted by an angry mob. Because I am.

What the hell have I stumbled into?

* * *

Surrounded by a pack of angry wolves, I try to control my frantic heartbeat and hope I’m not sweating too badly while I act as the voice of reason.

“Hold on a moment. Let’s talk—”

“Shut it, you frozen piece of shit.” The ringleader seethes with rage, barely holding himself back. The wolves around me aren’t much better, creeping closer and closer every second.

This is so not good. These wolves aren’t interested in reason at all.

“Here’s how this is gonna go.” The human cracks his knuckles as he invades my personal space, a dangerous glint in his eyes. “You’re gonna answer our questions and tell us the truth. If you try anything or hold back, we’ll be on you before you can say freeze.”

The wolves snort and grumble around us, enjoying that comment for some reason. I think I'm picking up on a theme.

"There's been a mistake," I whisper.

"Hear that? Doesn't sound like he's interested in talking after all. Let's shatter this block of ice."

Yep, they don't like magic. Well, it's hard to tell if they are against all wizards or just icebrands.

I raise my hands to protect myself though there isn't enough time to ready my magic and cast.

"Hold on! Stop!"

The man I came here for arrives. Ewan fights his way to the front. A few wolves don't budge at first but then they register the man behind him and create space for them to reach me.

Ewan sends me a look I can't begin to decipher then turns his back and faces the others, putting himself between me and them.

"Get it together! Dammit, Sam," he barks. "You can't attack every visitor just because—"

"He isn't a visitor," the angry man yells back. "He's the bastard responsible!"

"You're wrong," Ewan insists, not backing down. "I know him."

"You know the asshole icing our pack into oblivion?"

“What?” I sputter and feel the urge to hide behind Ewan as I feel the wolves focus on me once more. “I’m not, I have no idea what they’re saying,” I promise to Ewan’s back.

Half Ewan’s face becomes visible as he turns toward me for a second. “I know.”

Sam’s fists clench and he jerks his head at me. “Our alpha smelled the chill in your friend here.”

“Yes, I did,” agrees the man who accompanies Ewan. “Though I did not send this many of you to check it out.”

Sam’s defiance falters and he lowers his gaze before finding confidence again. “This is our chance to catch him. We couldn’t let him slip away again.”

“He isn’t responsible,” Ewan starts.

“Why is he poking around then?”

Ewan stands his ground, not provoking the other shifter but not backing down or giving up any space either. When Sam starts getting in Ewan’s face, the alpha intervenes. He clears his throat and they both step back. The man’s gaze falls on me.

“What’s going on?”

Even without the blonde hair and similar build, he reminds me of Ewan. Older than him, and not as high strung and hotheaded as the rest. He’s the calm in the center of the storm. It makes sense since he must be one of the pack’s alphas.

I really want to explain to this level-headed leader who will actually listen. Except... I’m surrounded by hostile strangers and the nature of what brings me here is...

intimate. I start blushing and stammering. “See, here’s the thing. I know, well, I met... um. The thing is...”

Ewan steps in for me once more. “He’s here for me.” He coughs. “You know, this is the guy...”

Despite the terrible circumstances, I’m strangely touched. While I doubt he’d be crass, Ewan could explain who I am better than that. He’d say I’m the man he spent the night with a few days ago or something. I think he’s trailing off for my benefit. They may be his pack, but they’re strangers to me and did not give me the warmest welcome, so I’m much more comfortable with the trailing off.

The alpha only needs a few seconds before the message registers. Surprisingly, the guy who was at Ewan’s throat a moment ago gets it too.

“Him?” Sam jerks his head in my direction. “This is the guy you fucked around with?” Yep, much too blunt. He smirks realizing how I’m blushing and can barely meet anyone’s eyes. It annoys me.

”Yes,” I confirm, managing to stare at him and the alpha so they see it’s true. Then Sam winks and I splutter and force my gaze to the safe ground once more. Oh my god. How much magic would it take to open up a hole in the ground and bury myself in it?

“He comes from many generations of icebrands,” the alpha says.

“Even I can smell ice on him,” Sam adds. “You didn’t think that was strange?”

“Seeing as I sensed his earth magic and trespassed on his property to find him? Nope,” Ewan says. “It doesn’t mean anything.”

The alpha just keeps staring evenly, which kind of reminds me of Ewan, though much more unnerving from this man. “I thought the man you were with couldn’t contact you again. That’s why you—”

I really want to know how the sentence ends but Ewan interrupts.

“You’re right,” he says. “But I’m sure he has an explanation.”

Yes, but not one I’m eager to explain to everyone.

Sam nods at someone behind me and a second later someone tosses him a cell phone. That’s my cell phone! I spin around and pat my pockets, not even noticing when the theft happened. When I turn back, Sam is scrolling through my phone like it’s his and something makes him look awfully smug.

“He’s got a lot of explaining to do, all right.” Sam shows Ewan the phone.

Whatever Ewan sees isn’t good. His face changes. He doesn’t like what he sees. He’s looking at me like a stranger when he finally raises his gaze again.

We are strangers, I remember. We shared a brief connection for a night. That’s all. It suddenly seems so small compared to all the history he has with his pack.

I have no idea what could possibly be so incriminating on my phone, but it doesn’t matter. Will he really defend me when faced with all the people he knows and loves telling him I’m guilty?

I need to get out of here.

Enough commotion carries on around me as people shout and pass the phone around. I concentrate. When ready, my hand carefully slides down to the trinkets attached to

my belt.

“Hey!”

It's too late. I throw all the power available to me into the magic, praying this works.

The ground shakes. The branches in the closest trees whip towards us violently like they're going to rip free of their makers and batter against us. Enough of the wolves stumble and fall back.

As they fall back, the group behind me retreats and they come together as one, regrouping for strength in numbers. It gives me what I need to part the earth near our feet, creating a gorge between me and them.

It's little more than what Ewan and I did the night we created magic. Those in wolf form can probably jump over it easily and the hole isn't too deep, just enough to put some distance between us.

The trees rattle again and the wolves put more distance between us, ready to cover themselves and avoid the falling debris...so I take the opportunity, wheel around, and run like hell.

The damage to the ground is about the same as a reckless driver could create on wet ground. A nuisance, though nothing major. The rest is a bluff as I won't actually tear anything down.

I'd be tearing down decades or possibly even a few centuries worth of growth. It would take a long time to build back if no earthbrand helps maintain their land. I don't really want to hurt Ewan's pack land more than necessary to get away since they've got enough to deal with.

I start running to my car. With how my day started, I really couldn't believe it would get worse. Yet here I am running from a pack of wolves.

* * *

Running from a pack of angry wolves determined to tear me apart isn't the time to panic and have a nervous breakdown.

Holy crap, I'm actually running from a pack of huge, furious wolves who are determined to tear me apart.

This is exactly the right time to freak out and have a nervous breakdown. It just won't do me any good, not until I get away safely. But my thoughts haunt me almost more than the wolves at my back.

"What in the world should I do now?"

My family wishes to control me. Ewan's pack hates me. What if I don't have a place with either ice or earth? If I don't belong with either element, will I lose magic?

I nearly trip over an exposed root in my path as the thought chills me to the bone. Feeling torn between two elements isn't new. The decision seems impossible but is also simple. It has to be earth or ice. One or the other. No other element compels me. My future lies with ice magic or earth magic.

This is the first time it really hits me. Choosing between one or the other is only one possible outcome. The other is not getting either one.

No element means no magic. No magic. A life without magic... How would I live without it?

Lots of people live without magic. But not me, not my family. Growing up as a Blanchard made a brand seem like a certainty. A Brass without magic? My parents might move across the country, maybe settle somewhere colder, all to avoid the embarrassment. The folks at their country club would consider this quite a scandal. In this case, it isn't them I worry about.

One of the few things I have in common with my parents is one of the most important. We're all magical.

Getting a brand isn't about making them proud. Getting an icebrand would be. But a brand? That's about me.

I'm a wizard. I have to be. I don't think I could ever settle for anything else. It's who I am. I need magic to be complete.

Choosing one element is difficult but not having either ice or earth magic? The thought sounds unbearable. It's the worst thought in the entire world. Similar to when I wondered if I'd ever see Ewan again.

Considering a life without magic distresses me so much that my steps falter and I stumble, even with my path clear. This really isn't the time for my feet to not deliver their best work ever. I need to run faster than I've ever run before. It's the only way I have a prayer of avoiding my wolf pursuers.

But I do. I stumble and then stop in my tracks. Not getting an element and eventually being cut off from magic is even scarier than a pack of angry wolves out for blood.

That's when I hear it.

A whisper on the wind makes me jump because I'm afraid it's coming from the people chasing me. Then I register the feeling, the same one I get when watching the

sun shine down on flowers in bloom. The same as when I stand in my garden and call the magic to me or grab my flower petal token, but so much stronger.

The choice is yours.

The voice comes from nowhere and everywhere all at once. Orange and golden flower petals burst into life around me. Tropical hibiscus blossoms rain down, my favorite flower. My mouth drops open in shock. I may love the flower, but it's a rare sight in person since the plant is exotic and hard to grow here.

The petals catch the sudden breeze that picks up and they hang in the air, swirling around me, a storm of orange and gold wonders. For a second, I think I'm dreaming. Or maybe the wolves caught me and knocked me out and I'm unconscious right now?

The choice is yours. The choice is yours.

I watch in awe as the petals spin around me and a voice from nowhere speaks. I want to record this with my cellphone, remember this, but I can't move and break the spell.

The only other possible explanation... is the Earth element speaking to me? The element conjured the petals, dancing tropical blossoms that I could reach out and touch if the wind calmed.

There's no one method for how someone receives a test. Some swear they are spoken to. Others just know what to do. No one ever says how you know, only that you do.

And now I understand. This is it. I'm being given a choice for my test. What choice?

You know what you must do. Choose your path. Claim your element. Make your choice.

Then it's gone. The voice and the feeling leave. The wind cuts off like someone tripped over an industrial fan's electrical cord. The petals fall. There's quiet in my head.

If a pair of paws and the snarling beast they're attached to takes me down right now, I won't even notice. Slowly, I bend down, all the petals have vanished entirely, save for one. I pick it up, feeling the soft top side and waxy surface underneath. It's real. That just happened.

My test is to choose. Now that the shock fades, the test is obvious. I know exactly what my choices are, exactly what the Earth is asking of me. Choose between the earth and the ice.

My test is to choose? That... It's... That's so stupid.

Isn't that what we all do? We pick our favorite elements. We study them. We hope they'll find us worthy. We keep learning about magic and ourselves, waiting for the day we get the test. We all choose the direction we head in, just not when we receive the test.

Then I remember this morning. How my parents realized my power was focused on earth magic and became furious. My parents were capable of being quite terrifying, so I jumped right into action, trying to reassure and appease them. They asked if I planned this and devoted myself to the earth without telling them. I said no. It isn't a lie.

But I could have answered in so many other ways. I could have told them this took me by surprise too, but I do feel drawn to earth magic. I do like it. Instead, I let them steamroll me and make demands.

And instead of finding Ewan again on my own, I needed an excuse to give me the

courage to seek him out.

I reacted to my parents' anger, just like now when running from the wolves. The wolves who weren't giving chase after all. I'd given them more than enough time to catch me and yet no one came running up.

I studied magic. I wanted a brand. But did nothing to get one. Having both the earth and the ice with me is comforting. Despite my desire for real magic, I also dread the day I'll have to let one element go. Everything will change then and there's no going back.

I reacted, I took opportunities when they came, but I never created any of my own. I keep putting off the decision for a little longer.

Maybe I do need to make a choice after all.

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By the time I reach my car, the wolves who chased me away are the farthest thing from my mind.

My test has arrived. The Earth element delivered a test and changed everything. I collapse against my car, not bothering to leave. Nobody chases me anymore anyway.

“Do you have any other instructions for me?” I ask, crossing my fingers for more guidance.

Nope, that hope fades quickly as nothing speaks to me and I feel no magic in the air.

Now that I’ve been given a test, the next steps are pretty simple.

If you don’t take an element’s test, there’s no guarantee the element will issue it again or that another will either. It’s possible to fail and still be given another chance, but you can also fail so spectacularly you’re rejected. Rejection is an element’s final answer, and one rejection can deter other elements too.

Waiting for a short time is acceptable when torn between options. This lets another element offer its own test, but no element wants to feel like a placeholder.

An elemental test is an honor. If you’re foolish enough to not take that seriously, if you don’t show proper respect for the proceedings, well... Elements are destructive enough as part of the natural order of the world. Pissing them off is never a wise decision.

Whatever I do must be done carefully and seriously with the best of intentions

and—oh dear.

I've just been issued one of the biggest, most important challenges a potential wizard ever faces, and I already made a mistake. I really should have gotten myself together quicker and left. It turns out I am being followed.

The steps of the person running towards me are closing in. I whirl around.

Ewan stops short like he hit an invisible brick wall. He was clearly expecting more distance to cover, more of a challenge than me standing here dumbly.

We both stare at each other. I find my voice first. "Don't worry. That display was more than enough. I got the message. I'm going."

"No, don't go." His arm lifts to reach out but he stops himself. "Let me explain."

Nobody in wolf or human form lurks over his shoulder. Of course, anyone familiar with the land could cut through the trees on two or four legs and surprise me.

I have to ask, "Is anyone else coming?"

"No, I talked them down."

"You did? Why? It seemed like you were listening to them for a moment there."

He winces. "Yeah, for one very stupid second I started buying into their version and I immediately regretted it." The sincerity and regret on his face takes me by surprise. "We were assholes, I'm sorry. Let me fill you in. You deserve that much, at least."

This decision is much easier.

“Alright,” I say. “Explain.”

Ewan nods, opens his mouth, and then says nothing for several seconds. “Actually, follow me.”

Then he turns and starts walking. I hesitate by my black town car but can’t stay behind for long. The curiosity wins out.

We walk deeper into the forest before Ewan finds his voice and starts telling his story.

“Our land is suffering. The trees are sick, the plants are dying. The ground is hard and unyielding. Everything feels brittle and not right. It’s like our land is stuck in winter and everything is still frozen. There isn’t any snow on the ground and the temperature is warmer, but that’s what we kept coming back to.”

Huh. I see what he’s talking about. The forest appears normal enough as a whole from the outside. Going further in and focusing on the individual trees shows limp branches, few leaves, and thinning bark. Some areas of the forest are bare and damaged while others were untouched. An insect or disease doesn’t just attack some trees and jump over other trees of the same kind.

The forest should be alive and thriving, yet everything is still and sparse. A supernatural issue isn’t immediately apparent, but it’s clear something is off.

The anemic trees and inhospitable land are only detectable when walking deeper into the forest. The place still looks like a beautiful natural paradise from the outside. Like someone is worried about appearances and property values or doesn’t wish to deter wealthy travelers from renting high-end vacation homes.

“We’re in trouble,” he says. “The wildlife, the plants, and trees, none of it is meant to

endure a frozen climate all year around. And all the damage is limited to our land and the land in the public areas that we help preserve.”

“You suspect foul play?”

“We know there’s foul play. Someone is trying to force us out. We’ve caught it a few times.” Ewan shakes his head, trying to describe it. “It’s this magical freeze. A thin layer of frost suddenly covers everything in one spot, and it’s gone a few minutes later, but damage is done.”

“The ice isn’t natural, it’s magical, so it does more damage than normal,” I realize. Elemental magic packs more punch than an element in its natural setting.

“And getting proof isn’t exactly simple. The evidence melts. It’s easy to point fingers about what’s going wrong but getting an unbiased third party here in time to witness the frost is tough enough, then linking it back to our neighbors...”

“Your neighbors?”

Ewan nods. “We’ve had bad blood with them for years. They don’t think we ‘belong’ here or that we meet their high standards. Being superior and judging people is all they do, but they have enough money and power that people fear challenging them.”

I’ve met enough people like that to know the type. Their idea of the ‘right’ sort of people usually comes down to the number of zeros attached to the end of one’s net worth.

“We’re in a forest, not a cul-de-sac, so avoiding our disapproving neighbors wasn’t terribly difficult before. Then a few months ago, they came to my uncles and offered to buy our land from us. They own the land as the alphas, but it’s for the whole pack, so of course they refused to sell.”

“Then the trouble started?”

Ewan nods. “Our pack’s relationship with this land extends long before people decided to build vacation homes here. Our pack came together to buy as much land as we could so our wolves would always have a place here. Some of us have done well enough that we can take opportunities to buy more of the land when it’s available. But even those who can’t contribute financially still find ways to care for the forest. And now...”

Now all their hard work was being undone by foul play.

“That’s why you don’t want to move,” I say.

“We can’t let them win,” Ewan growls. “They want us out and they’re playing dirty to get their way. We’ve worked hard to keep our pack here. That’s not fair.”

“No, it isn’t.”

All the confusion and hurt from his pack’s reaction is melting away and now I just hurt for him. I wish there were something I could do.

“They’re breathing down our necks,” Ewan continues. “Trying to force us out, saying we can’t be trusted to protect our property or the natural land nearby. The worse it gets, the more it seems like they’re right. That our land would be better off without us.”

“If it’s a magical problem, surely there’s a magical solution.”

“Maybe.” Ewan gives me a dry smile. “But wouldn’t you know it, none of our old caster contacts are taking our calls.”

Some casters specialize in detecting magical evidence and uncovering foul play. That doesn't help the pack if casters refuse to work with them. Which must mean they fear the repercussions of assisting the wolves.

"The family in question is magical?" I put together.

"Yep. Powerful too. Nobody else wants to piss them off."

"But they aren't icebrands?" If the neighbors feuding with icebrands suddenly found their land damaged by frost all year round, that would look very suspicious.

"No, these are metalbrands," Ewan answers. "Being active, respected casters puts them in touch with multiple casters with other brands, so them knowing icebrands isn't proof of anything. That's what we're missing. We need a direct link. Something to prove they have an unexplained icebrand on their payroll, or a money trail, or catching the person in the act."

"Oh." And now I'm beginning to see how I fit into all this.

"Then you showed up smelling of ice," Ewan says.

"Anytime you notice even a whiff of ice magic, someone investigates immediately?" I fill in.

"Yeah. Seeing as the property lines aren't clearly marked in the wilderness and our land gives way to natural forest and trails open to anyone, we can't just patrol and keep our senses peeled for intruders. People innocently wander onto our property all the time. We watch out for ice and ice magic instead. Occasionally we find the frost as it's melting, but we haven't been able to catch a person."

"Sam and the others thought they finally had their lucky break and caught the person

responsible.” Now how they greeted me makes sense.

“Look, they were out of line.” Ewan hangs his head. “And I’m sorry they scared the hell out of you. I just wanted you to know why.”

“You don’t think I’m responsible?” I wonder.

“To be honest, you aren’t the link anybody was expecting. I just needed to remind them of that. Your family already has power and money. Why would they risk their necks sabotaging us? Can’t imagine anything is in it for them to make it tempting enough.”

Sensible. Though Ewan’s face when he looked at my phone didn’t look sensible. His face had looked complicated, maybe even pained. “So you just thought it through?” I wonder.

“Sort of.” He shrugs and sticks his hands in his pockets. “I can’t really give you a concrete answer. That’s why I froze up when the pack confronted you.” Ewan makes a face when he realizes what he said, froze up might not have been the best choice of words in this instance given the circumstances. “I trust my pack, and I didn’t know how to convince them when their instincts are telling them one thing and mine are saying another.”

“What do your instincts say?” I whisper.

Ewan meets my eyes solemnly. “That I can trust you.”

I know what he means. Since we started getting to know each other, I have the same feeling about him. I wonder if it’s a magical instinct or just a human one, telling me this is a good guy, that I’m in good hands with him. Or maybe I’m just a romantic to think we were supposed to meet, so he could lead me down the right path and open

my eyes.

...

Oh my. Is that what's happening here? I really can't think about that right now... but I wouldn't describe that feeling as wrong.

"I understand if you can't trust me too," Ewan continues and pulls me from my internal crisis. "My pack made the worst impression ever and I was no help at all. I understand if you run away and never turn back."

"I'm still here," I say.

"I noticed."

Just like that, the last of the tension and suspicion seems to fall away. Suddenly we're just two people standing in a forest that's seen better days, two people who are smiling at each other. Being around him now is like I remember. Nothing else seems important. Or at least nothing else seems as important as him.

But Ewan's pack is in trouble. They were even thinking of surrendering the land and starting over elsewhere. If possible, I need to help them—help him.

When I look around again, the details begin making more sense. A magical person could get into the common grounds easily, and even 'wander' into the pack's private land without much hassle, but it would get trickier to avoid detection once the wolves caught on. The clusters of damaged trees makes me think about how a spell could target one isolated spot that then spreads to the nearby land and trees. Starting small would give the caster enough time to flee before the wolves picked up on the ice and explains why some areas are damaged while the land immediately adjacent shows no traces of hardship; the spell only expands out a certain distance from the place it

originated from.

One other detail sticks out too. The caster must be a novice. Maybe someone very newly branded, but a novice is most likely. A branded wizard could affect a much larger area instead of needing to cast multiple spells over an extended period of time.

If a screwed up icebrand wanted to harm the wolves' land and drive them away, their powers would make the result more effective than this.

"Oh, before I forget." Ewan pulls something from his back pocket and hands it to me. "Here's your phone back. I didn't look at it more."

That reminds me. "What did they show you?" Whatever it was seemed to concern him.

"Yeah, that didn't help." He grimaces with a weak chuckle. "You placing so many calls to our neighbor's son. But they have a main house and do business near where you live all the time, that's where we were meeting them the day I met you. They probably know all the icebrand families in the area that run in the same circles as them, that doesn't prove any of you are involved."

"Wait, what, back up. I know the people involved?"

"Unless there's a different Percy Brass with pretentious metalbrand parents. Is he even back in town or are you guys chatting long distance?"

My head spins as I put all the information he's given me together. I keep reaching the same conclusion. I can't help smiling. There's hope.

"Ewan, you were right to keep holding on and waiting for the proof you need."

“Yeah,” he huffs out a laugh. “I sure hope so.”

“This is it,” I say. “You just found the missing piece you need. I know what’s going on.”

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:23 am

When we hopped in Ewan's truck, he got as far as sticking the key in the ignition before he stopped and turned to me. "Wait, run this by me again."

Ewan has been waiting for what he needs to expose the Brass family's deceptions. Now that he's found the link he needs, it's taking a minute to sink in.

"The Brass's son Percy is a future icebrand," I say.

"Right, yeah." Ewan drums his fingers on the dashboard, still a bit dazed. "Nobody in America seems to know anything about the Brass sons and then you waltz in and crack the case wide open."

"Uh, I'm sorry?"

"Nah, it's fine." He cracks a smile. "My pride will recover, eventually."

The shock is fading if he's cracking jokes. I still give him a few moments to process everything.

Fortunately, we're still parked. I don't think he sees anything ahead. I planned to get him up to speed while we hopped in his truck and drove closer to the Brass's secluded lakefront property. Good thing he insisted I fill him in first. We haven't even progressed to turning the keys in the ignition.

It isn't surprising they had no idea Percy was back. The Brass family would need to hide him and his connection to ice magic from the wolves they were tormenting. No wonder they found no paper trail or smoking gun either. The Brass family kept their

dirty dealings inside the family.

“All we could find out is that the Brass’s have two sons, who spend most of their time in Europe. They’ve been studying at magical boarding schools for years. If their son Percy is doing his family’s dirty work and keeping a low profile, how do you know he’s back from boarding school?” Ewan asks next.

“My family happens to sponsor him. My parents always demand to see him whenever he comes home.” I’ve suspected that’s why he stays away. “Their sponsorship provides him with a stronger token, and his school is supposed to monitor him in lieu of my family. Magic really doesn’t translate well over phone or video chat. But I doubt his school is as thorough as my parents would have been.”

Few people are. My parents aren’t exactly ‘hands off’ people, but they trusted Percy’s parents enough to grant the token.

“Happen to sponsor Percy, huh?” he murmurs, thinking something over.

“What, you think—” Did he think my parents were involved too? “My parents wouldn’t. Their idea of fighting dirty is doing anything legally permissible to win. Bending perhaps but never breaking rules... that doesn’t sound nearly as reassuring as I hoped, does it?”

“No, hey, I’m not blaming you or your family.” Ewan gives me a smile and I relax so he can continue. “But he’s who you were supposed to be meeting, right? That means us both being nearby wasn’t a coincidence. I was in the area for a meeting at their main house with Percy’s father and his army of lawyers. They had us drive up to inform us that their generous offer,” he spits those words. “to buy our land is still on the table. But they did lower their price because of the damage.”

The very damage they caused. I’d be pissed too. No wonder he needed to shift and

get away from his troubles.

“Percy wasn’t at the meeting,” Ewan continues. “But I’m guessing he was nearby. Small world, huh?”

Actually, the coincidence wasn’t that shocking.

The magical university saw many potential wizards and the wizarding community in the area was good-sized due to it, but this meant that no one element dominated the area. Only a handful of families represented each of the major brands. So, if something nefarious were happening with ice magic, it stood to reason my family might know or at least have some connection to those involved...

...Sure, it felt like magic, the elements, or some grand force in the universe all conspired to bring Ewan and I together so that I could help, so that we could meet. But I remind myself, forcefully, that it’s logical enough.

“Okay, I’m alright,” Ewan says as he turns the key in the ignition. “Let’s drive over.”

The trees and terrain largely block the home from view when we get close. The Brass vacation home is on one edge of the lake and their property rests at the top of a steep, rocky incline. I have to squint to make out the hidden road leading up to their place. They couldn’t fence themselves in or entirely keep people out in an area like this. They’d still done everything possible to set themselves apart.

“It’s strange,” I say. “Why is Percy doing this for his parents? Why are they letting him? It’s awfully risky.”

Ewan’s face darkens and he doesn’t sound surprised. “Not if they think they’re untouchable and won’t get caught.”

“Maybe. The elements care less about human morals and more about the strength of your skills and your devotion. But it breaks all kinds of human magical rules.”

The elements cared about their own set of criteria and us humans tried to fill in the gaps with rules designed to emphasize responsible, ethical casting.

“Hmm.” Ewan considers this. “You think there’s something we’re missing?”

“Yes,” I say. “It’s possible.”

Was the situation with the wolves so bad the Brass family had enough? Or did Percy take matters into his own hands and decide to get rid of their pests for himself? There were so many possible angles. Wouldn’t Percy eventually return home with his brand? Perhaps the Brasses are counting on forcing the wolves out soon and it will be too late for the pack to do anything by that point?

I worry we aren’t seeing the whole picture. And we have no idea what surprises wait for us inside. Percy’s probably staying here, since this location is much closer to the wolves he’s sabotaging. Is he alone?

“Tell me you have a better plan than us ringing on the doorbell and seeing who is at home,” Ewan demands.

Not exactly. I could be leading Ewan into grave danger. He trusts me and he could end up hurt because of me.

That does give me one important detail, and I fill in the rest of the plan from there. I draw my eyes away from the property and twist towards him in my seat. This seems like a face-to-face conversation.

“About that. You’re not going in. I am. Alone.”

A muscle in Ewan's face twitches and suddenly a pissed off wolf is next to me. "Like hell you are."

"I'll be perfectly safe. He's trying to hurt your family. He needs mine."

"Which means he'll keep up appearances and not reveal anything."

"And his defenses will go right up if he sees you."

Things start changing from a face-to-face conversation to a face-to-face argument.

"You said it yourself that we're in the dark here," he grinds out through clenched teeth. "That's not the time to go it alone."

"We don't have a better option."

He almost brings his fist down hard on the dashboard, then he seems to remember that he loves his truck and pats it awkwardly instead while his face turns more sour. "Two is better than one."

"You can come in if I'm in trouble."

"What about me being there to stop the trouble?" he mutters.

Ewan stares darkly at the keys in the ignition like he's thinking about turning this car around and driving away. I snatch the keys just in case he decides to really do it and he sends me possibly the meanest face I've ever seen anyone make, and what do I do? I only give him a sunny smile in return.

Who am I and what have I done with the real Jack Blanchard?

I'm sitting in a small, enclosed space with a pissed off werewolf and I'm not scared at all. Ewan's feeling protective over me.

Even when his own pack was at each other's throats and the other wolf goaded him, Ewan and the alpha were the calm in the storm. Yet I have the power to fluster him and rile him up.

"Jack, this is too much." Ewan's big, worried eyes watch me with concern.

I feel so small and foolish for being happy when I hear the honest ache in his voice, this is clearly tearing him up.

"My pack were complete assholes to you," he says. "And you're sticking your neck out to help us. It's too much to ask."

"You aren't asking. It's my choice." And I've made it. "I want to help, and I don't think I'm in any danger."

"They're closer than ever to getting what they want and you're stepping in to ruin their plans. That doesn't make you safe."

How can I live with myself if I turn my back on one of the kindest, most genuine people I've ever met? I have the power to help him, so I must. I need to.

Maybe it is fate that brought us together after all. I used to be so torn, but I'm getting better at determining what I want when he's around. Any choice that involves him is easier. I always want more of him. I need to be worthy of him. He makes it easy to envision the future I could have, if I were just a little bit braver and able to go after the man and magic I truly desire.

"I wish we could go in together too," I say. "But that's not going to work. I know

you'll come as soon as you can."

Ewan nods immediately and then registers my words and does a double take. "When I can? What does that mean?"

"Parking here and debating our options seems kind of risky," I say with a dry smile. The area was secluded but anyone traveling to their own accommodations could pass by and see our truck idling here. "But this is for the best since I'm developing a sense of the place. Active magic is nearby, out here. I can feel it. I've met metalbrands at the university, and the element doesn't feel like it should. I'm fairly certain there are preventative measures in place to keep curious wolves from coming too close."

"Preventative measures?" he repeats skeptically.

"Well... traps." There's no way around it. "They're traps."

"Fuck. Of course." He glares daggers at the property beyond the trees, like he can scare the traps into malfunctioning.

"They are your closest neighbors and things are heated between you. They put in extra security to keep you out. It would be easy for you to snoop, just as it's easy for one of them to wander into your land." With wolves and their enhanced senses, 'easy' is a stretch but possible. Especially since people come and go from the pack borders all the time without realizing they strayed too far.

If we're lucky, Ewan should be able to get in eventually, if I work my literal magic first.

"This isn't my forte, but the good news is that I should be able to get you past the harmful metal. It's just gonna take a bit of time for you to navigate."

”So, this is really our plan? You go in alone and I come as soon as I can get past the security.”

”I can do this,” I promise.

”I believe you.” He puts a gentle hand on my knee and it’s a struggle not to melt under his concern. “I just hate putting you in danger. I won’t be able to forgive myself if you get hurt.”

“That won’t happen,” I assure him quietly, hoping it’s the truth.

As we brace ourselves for splitting up, we stare at each other, and I see everything I’m feeling reflected in his eyes. He cares for me the same as I do for him. So much is in the air between us, things we wish we could say. There are words on the tip of my tongue, but I hold them back and so does he.

It’s like the hotel room all over again, except I’m the one on the verge of leaving as both of us debate what to say.

Except this time, we’re holding back for a different reason. This isn’t the time or place to say those things. We might not know what we’ll face inside, but what I need to do now is clear. I have to focus.

The effectiveness of my magic will determine how safely Ewan gets through the traps keeping him away. Any distraction now could injure him later if the magic gives out, so I can’t take the risk, not when he’d pay the price. I’m the one who wouldn’t be able to forgive myself if my magic couldn’t protect him.

So, I clear my throat and crane my neck enough to see the toolkit still sits behind us in its regular spot. ”Will you grab me a metal tool from your kit?”

Ewan shifts around and the latch on the box clicks open. I can't see the pink or the sparkles with the seat in the way but I realize what he selected anyway.

"Not your sister's hammer. Something you don't mind losing."

He sets the hammer down on the seat between us while he roots around for something else. "Screwdriver okay?"

"It's perfect."

Holding it in my hand, I let the metal heat between my fingers.

My metal token is nothing special, a small circle made of a composite of different metals. A meager training token, standard and functional, that's all. I hold it now like it's priceless as I bring the screwdriver and token together, letting the magic flow through the token into the tool. I imagine the metal is little more than water, liquid metal flowing out however I want. The token wraps around my finger like a ring and I start shaping the screwdriver.

The long shaft of the tool splits into two branching pieces that form a 'Y' shape. When I finish, a divining rod rests in my hand. Next, I give the rod purpose and tell it what to seek out.

Then I hand it over to Ewan. "The metal should be attracted to other metal. The closer you get, the stronger the vibrations."

"So I need to avoid whatever it picks up on."

"Yes. Look for a path between all the traps."

Ewan holds it up to inspect the new shape. "What happens if I do hit metal?"

"Do we really want to find out?" I'd rather not imagine that.

"Good point," he says. "Thanks. I'll be there as soon as I can."

My parents sent me away a few short hours ago to get my power under control. They wished to have Percy and his family over for dinner tonight. Here I was about to gatecrash their vacation home with a rogue wolf.

* * *

When it comes time to put our plan into motion, Ewan and I split up. Ewan still isn't comfortable with the divide and conquer part of our strategy, but there isn't another option. Knocking on the door won't get him inside.

But it should work for me.

This is our opening move. I'll go in using the friendly approach.

A housekeeper answers the door. She seems hesitant about letting unannounced visitors drop in, and I feel a little foolish when I give her my family's name like it's a secret password and she just keeps blinking at me in confusion. Then I take out the charm tucked under my shirt, the frozen snowflake. The token has no power but is a clear symbol of my connection to ice. Since Percy is sponsored by my parents, I have no doubt his token matches mine. The woman recognizes it immediately and does allow me in.

So far so good. But that's the easy part.

I soon stand in front of Percy Brass's bedroom door. A thin layer of fog leaks out from inside and the air is noticeably colder. Frost clings to the door. Definitely in the right place. Barging into his room without knocking is terribly rude, under normal

circumstances, but it means he can't ignore me.

And luck is on my side. Or rather, ice is. Percy's door isn't actually closed but cracked open, which means all I'm really doing is walking through an open door.

Leaving the door ajar is much simpler. That's one of those tricks you learn growing up in an overgrown icicle. Ice gets into the cracks in the doorjamb and freezes the door in place otherwise. It's easy enough to pry open with a little magic but gets annoying fast.

Since I'm pretending to be here in the spirit of goodwill, I do give him some warning by knocking on the door while allowing myself inside.

"Hello? The door was open. I hope I'm not intruding."

"Who the—" Percy meets me at the front of his room. Brows furrowed, he takes me in. His eyes land on the still exposed snowflake token hanging near my chest. The dark hair gives him pause and he checks it twice, though still reaches the right conclusion. "You're my date. The one who stood me up."

"Guilty." My nerves aren't totally hidden, but they seem warranted when met with his stony expression. "I'm here to apologize."

Percy rolls his eyes. "Yeah. I got your messages."

"They aren't a substitute for a real in person apology." Especially with him ignoring them.

He scowls and waves his hand. "Drop the act." Oh no. "You're here because your parents chewed you out for ditching me."

Good, no need to worry after all. Ditching him rubbed him the wrong way and he's written me off, but it turned out to be a wise decision. I now have the perfect cover to be here.

"Okay, you caught me." I raise my hands in surrender and try to summon a friendly smile. "I'm here because of my family, which is funny, seeing as my parents set up our lunch without even consulting me and I avoided that."

"Believe me, I know the feeling," he mutters. Guess his parents sprung our appointment on him too.

Finally, Percy backs up and allows me further into the room. He doesn't offer me a seat, which is just as well. Everything is covered in ice.

I'd need a chisel to break the metaphorical ice of his defenses as he keeps his guard up. But I have to take the opportunity and try to create some common ground between us.

"My family can be... difficult." To put it mildly. "I sometimes resent their interference, so I ditched you. I apologize, that wasn't fair to you. Are your parents the same way?"

Percy's icy blue eyes roll dramatically. "My parents made it perfectly clear that choosing a path other than metal doesn't come with special treatment. I'm still expected to brand ASAP and master ice magic. No Brass can be average. Can you imagine the scandal at the country club?"

He doesn't sound quite as sarcastic as he's aiming for. What people at the country club think clearly matters to him, even if he wishes otherwise. I can work with this.

"We have a lot in common," I say.

“There is no we.” Percy glares at me. “What’s your excuse? If the things your parents boast about to my parents are even half true, ice should already be yours.”

Or maybe I can’t work with this after all.

I cross my arms. “Cold in here,” I say, rubbing my arms and trying to pretend that’s why my arms are wrapped across my chest.

Since I grew up in a giant icicle, my act fails.

Percy realizes he struck a nerve and tilts his head as he studies me. The sudden scrutiny makes me wish I had more arms or a parka to cover myself with. He doesn’t seem to see me, more like he’s looking through me. A strange expression crosses his face.

“Ice likes you,” he says as if the element is whispering in his ear. “Ice would accept you in a second if you only bothered giving it your devotion.” He walks closer, almost in a trance as he reads me. “The element sits there in your back pocket, your safety. You take it for granted and you’re tempted to throw it away.”

Alright, things are technically going according to plan. I’ve gotten Percy talking. But now that I have, I very much regret it and don’t like what he’s talking about at all. It’s a struggle not to back away.

“How, how do you know that?”

“Seems my abilities are superior to yours.” His lip curls up as he smirks. “You’re shaking, Jack.”

“It’s cold.”

“Surprised you even noticed. Then again, it isn’t frost’s chill that clings to you now, is it?”

Percy’s eyes swing down to a point at my chest and he scowls. Before I figure out what he means, he moves fast, grabbing the collar of my shirt and tugging it down. He exposes the bite mark there, the purple color especially vivid against my pale, cold skin.

“You’re disgraceful, Jack. A wolf mounts you and you’re ready to throw your legacy out the window.”

Percy’s hateful glare is so disturbing I raise my hand to cover the mark. A bite mark left by Ewan. Oh gosh, this is it. This is what interfered with my powers.

Ewan and I performed earth magic together. I’ve seen the forest he loves and cares for with his pack. He reminds me of the earth element and all its temptations. That makes his mark a connection to the earth element and the magic the two of us created together the night he gave me this mark. This is what has been screwing up my magic. His mark on me is clouding out the rest.

This little revelation and everything it might mean will have to wait for later. Because Percy Brass is much too close and watching me with too keen eyes.

Time for some space. I put enough distance between us that my back hits the frosty wall behind me. I let the biting cold in, keeping my back there and letting the shock of it keep me sharp and on my toes.

Just hang on a little longer. I can’t back down yet. At least he’s reacting to me instead of freezing me out. This is good. Terrifying, but good. All I have to do is keep pressing.

“My abilities are limited now, but it isn’t permanent. I’m trying to break my connection to earth.”

“Spare me.” Percy rolls his eyes.

”No, I am. I didn’t mean for it to happen and I’m going to reverse it.”

“Stop trying to fool me.”

“Fool you? I’m thanking you. Now that I know this mark has been blocking the rest of my powers, I can fix the mistake.” Except it isn’t a mistake. It’s just one more sign pointing me in the right direction. But at least I sound convincing.

Percy isn’t fooled. “I’ve known you were up to something since the minute you walked in,” he drawls. “You aren’t very good at playing games. Now I see why you’re really here.” His eyes nearly burn where they fall on the mark covered up by my shirt once more. “It isn’t just any wolf nibbling at your neck, is it? You’re close with the wolves that are bothering my poor parents. Do your parents know about that?”

Okay, maybe Ewan had a point about sending me in here all alone. It was a bad idea. Percy is so calculating, so cold, which can be expected given his connection to ice magic, but I didn’t really understand who I was dealing with. Not until now.

For a single moment, we’re on even ground. I see him just as clearly as he sees me. He isn’t just the entitled, self-important bastard I thought he was: he’s ruthless. And if I’m an obstacle standing in his way, will anything prevent him from obliterating me?

I’m not safe. I’m scared, scared and alone with—we aren’t alone.

“You son of a bitch.” Ewan’s there and he throws Percy against the wall by his bed in

an instant.

“This is trespassing and breaking and entering.” Percy gives no sign he’s at a disadvantage. He’s gleeful. “You’ve crossed the line now.”

“Me?” Ewan shakes him by the collar. “I crossed the line?”

Percy lifts his chin and sniffs dismissively. “This vendetta with my parents is making your band of mutts positively feral. You must be removed. This is a matter of public safety.”

Ewan growls and barely manages to hold himself together. “Give it up, you’re caught. Look where we’re freaking standing.”

We all glance around the mini-ice fortress. Percy’s smug grin grows.

“Surely you’ve noticed a thing or two about ice by now? It melts so quickly. The thorn in your side, as it were, is much more incriminating.”

He reaches down and jabs a finger near Ewan’s thigh. Ewan hisses and releases him. He moved so fast and had Percy against the wall that I didn’t notice the damage on his upper leg before. It’s hard to see between the blood on his jeans and how they’re embedded into his flesh, but they look like metal burrs, about the size of child’s jacks.

One of the traps got him. Oh no. The tool I transformed failed him. He was hurt because of me.

My face falls and Ewan shakes his head and reassures me. “It’s not your fault and I’ll be fine. I heard you two when I got close and rushed in.” All the kindness on his face evaporates as his gaze swings back towards Percy. “The real question is, why are magically spring-loaded barbs littered throughout your land? You could hurt someone

with this shit on your property.”

”The defenses are no more dangerous than your claws. And the traps are perfectly harmless to most. They’re only intended to target the riffraff.”

”Did you seriously say riffraff?” Ewan demands with such disgust I’d laugh in other circumstances.

Ewan grunts when I try to inspect his leg. Wolves don’t heal instantaneously but shifters do have faster healing times than humans, once the thing causing the injury is removed. Can I remove the metal pieces somehow?

”Oh, are you in pain? Let me help.” Percy pulls his ice token from under his shirt, and it glows as he touches the snowflake. Ewan grunts and has to lock his good leg in place to remain standing as, oh my god. Ice covers over the wound on his thigh and moves with wicked efficiency, trapping the metal burrs under a thick coating of ice and sending the pieces deeper into Ewan’s upper leg.

Even I want to punch Percy now. I won’t let this stand, so I focus on the wound. Maybe earth magic can thaw the ice?

But Percy acts first.

He sucker punches Ewan across the jaw. Ewan grunts, the hit not especially strong as far as he’s concerned, but I wince in sympathy, and then there are two men clashing violently in the room.

Ewan tackles Percy and they slam into the frozen bedframe, fine cracks in the ice spreading across the surface from the impact. Percy uses a gust of frosty air to push Ewan back and he lands on a table of pure ice that shatters under his weight. Percy readies a spell and Ewan flips onto his feet and launches himself, and I just barely

manage to throw myself between them.

"Stop, stop!" I nearly get hit several times while trying to pull them apart. "Quit fighting!"

"Call off your dog," Percy hollers back.

"Dog? I'll show you a—"

"That's enough!" I push my arms out wide to put more space between them but they both press against me, eager to come to blows again.

It's much more challenging holding Ewan back, so I shoot him a look to say please, stop and then focus on Percy.

We need to wrap this up fast. I have what we need anyway.

"Why don't we just leave all this alone and forget we were ever here? We've caused enough trouble for one day."

Ewan looks wounded at that. "But he—"

"You are both acting foolish."

"You're taking his side?" He sends a dark glare at Percy. "This isn't over."

"Fine with me." Percy waves goodbye, looking smug.

My heart races and I start shoving Ewan with both hands, herding him towards the door. We just need to get out now, but Ewan doesn't seem to get the hint. He goes, though.

Even with his injury, I doubt I could really drag him away, so he lets me usher us out the door. He just isn't very happy about it as he grumbles and moves far too slow for my liking. I can't tell if this is part of the act or not. I don't think he knows our plan succeeded yet.

Once we're in the hallway heading out of the house, some sanity returns and he moves faster. Are we going too quickly now? What if Percy realizes—oh whatever. Let's just get the hell out of here.

Once we exit the front door of the house, we both let out a breath in relief.

"He didn't reveal anything," Ewan mutters.

"Didn't have to." I walk quicker, hoping he'll keep up. "Good job, picking a fight with him."

"Hey, I had every right to--"

"I wasn't criticizing you," I mutter under my breath.

"The guy iced us," he says when he reaches the truck. "There's no doubt."

No kidding. "He wasn't even trying to hide it."

"But he held himself back just enough. He didn't slip up." Ewan slams his door shut. "Nothing he said is incriminating enough."

"That doesn't matter." A smile sneaks on my face.

"What did you do?"

"I was able to take this." I show him the snowflake hiding under my shirt. Getting between them during the fight, holding my hands against both their chests, it was almost easy to make the switch. Almost.

"A token? Your token?"

"No, it's his token." The ice token is cool against my chest and the magic chills my fingers as I hold it up. "I swapped them." My smile keeps growing and growing. "I have a feeling your land is about to thaw out."

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Sam squints at the object I hold up. “That’s what caused all our problems? We’re being driven off our land by-by, what, a freakin’ snowflake? Really?”

We’re sitting outside at a table in front of the pack house. The sky is getting darker, and I wonder if we’ll soon be sitting completely in the dark while we wait for the wolves on the other side of the table to catch up.

“This snowflake is a token,” I explain. “A magical charm blessed to assist unbranded casters. It allowed the Brass’s son to freeze you out.”

“But it belongs on a keychain!” Sam yells. “They sell those at gas stations for \$4.99.”

“No, this one is a token.” My eye twitches as I force myself to remain calm and keep a strained smile on my face. “The snowflake is real and magically preserved. It contains a blessing.”

I pray that I finally got through—

“Are you bullshitting me right now?” Sam demands.

“No.”

Sam sets two meaty fists on the wooden tabletop, still glaring at the token like it’s a great injustice. How can something that fits in the palm of his hand cause more damage than his muscles?

From their perspective, it must be incredibly anticlimactic. Ewan and I requested an

audience with the alphas and declared their troubles were over. All it took was popping over for a surprise visit and swapping one snowflake with another.

So yes, I understand that they need more information... but at the same time, three mosquitoes have bitten me in the last five minutes, and I really hope this goes smoother than my last run in with the pack.

“Okay, I get that you’re serious.” Sam inspects the token from every angle, twisting his head with his mouth dropped open in bewilderment. “But are you really serious?”

“Yes,” I say.

Be patient, I remind myself. They aren’t as familiar with magic. Be patie—ow! A fourth mosquito sneaks under the cuff of my pants and bites my ankle.

If only I had the patience of the man next to Sam. The alpha places a hand on his young packmate’s shoulder and the younger man’s mouth closes instead of asking more questions. The alpha Rowan has the same calm, steady demeanor as Ewan. Though I suppose it’s Ewan who takes after his uncle.

Rowan extends a hand and I place the token in it, letting him examine the charm. “Hard to believe. The tiny spark of magic I feel in this snowflake caused such destruction.”

“You’re right,” I say. “Us novice casters think our powers are so weak before branding, but they’re still strong enough to hurt others when used irresponsibly.”

“And swapping your charm with his is all it takes to put a stop to his manipulations?”

“I inherited an equivalent blessing from my parents, so my token isn’t functional.” A token token, that’s what my friend Marty calls it. “And now that we have Percy’s

token, we should be able to gain some information from it that links him to the damage on your lands.”

”That is what will happen now?” Rowan questions next.

“Yes. Even if Percy cloaked his actions, there are casters who specialize in detecting traces of magic. And the people who made this token will be able to see the magic he has cast recently.”

”And what will happen to Brass?” Sam wonders.

“The elements care less about right vs. wrong,” I explain. “But that’s why there’s also human perspective involved. If a person harms others or otherwise proves they can’t be trusted with a brand, the protections designed to keep magic from hurting novices are enhanced, so that no magic can get through.” The same happens when a person fails to brand and they’re cut off from magic for their own safety. “I can’t promise Percy will receive the maximum punishment, but a wizarding tribunal will review his conduct and decide on appropriate action. I’ve already contacted his sponsors about formally revoking his token and starting this process.”

”So that’s it?”

”Basically,” I say. “Call the numbers I gave you, give them the new information we’ve uncovered, and they’ll swing into action and sort everything out. If an earthbrand in some sort of official position hasn’t contacted you in a few days about undoing the damage, then let me know and we can start going through university channels instead.”

”My husband is inside making calls now.”

All the numbers I included were specially picked, people in the magic community

who were trusted as impartial and who I knew wouldn't be scared away by the Brass family blackballing the pack. Going through law enforcement was the best option, but if they were hesitant to act, people at the university would document everything for research and help undo the damage.

My parents' first response was that this better not be an attempt to get out of dinner tonight. I told them it was best to cancel and that I would soon be sending them photos of the damage.

They're on friendly terms with the Brass family of course, but there's enough now to investigate and back up the wolf's accusations. With evidence, this becomes more than a finger-pointing squabble between neighbors. My parents won't ignore a credible claim of magical abuse. That would jeopardize the Blanchard reputation. No friend of the family is worth more than their good name.

"That's it for now," I conclude. "Percy can't do more now that his token is gone."

We sit in the silence as it sinks in that their troubles are ending. Somewhere in the trees there's a shriek of laughter as the youngest in the pack play hide and seek, oblivious to the troubles the adults are dealing with.

"Okay, let me get this straight," Sam says eventually. "You swapped Percy Brass's special snowflake with your own snowflake that doesn't have magic. And because his special snowflake is gone, now he won't mess with us anymore?"

"Uh, yeah close enough."

"Bullshit," Sam declares immediately.

"Come on, man," Ewan says.

Huh. We did agree I'd take the lead here because I'm the one who can answer most of their questions. But once he speaks, I realize that's the first thing he's said in a while. Someone already tended to his leg when we came back here, so he isn't holding back because of his injury.

"No, for real," Sam insists. "This douche isn't supposed to sneak around and use magic to harm our land, but he did. The Brass's aren't supposed to lie and pretend they have nothing to do with the issues on our land, but they are. If they're doing whatever the hell they want, why are they going to start following the rules now?"

"He does have a point." The alpha notes lightly. Sam grins smugly at being vindicated. "It seems unlikely he'll come after us again once he discovers the swap and Percy knows that he's been caught. But there's nothing stopping him from attacking again, is there?"

"No, he won't keep going." I shrug helplessly as I try to explain. "Casting without the proper protections is dangerous. There's just no upside. The more you cast, you risk your mind and body breaking down so much that you become an unsuitable host for the essence of an element. You could have a heart attack, a stroke, or just go insane. And those are some of the better options."

"Better?" Ewan mutters.

"Yes. Because if you really make the elements or magic angry, they might get creative with your punishment." I shudder at the thought. "If you're lucky enough to scrape by with minimal harm, you just proved that you're too short-sighted and immature to handle all the powers and responsibilities of a lifetime commitment to an element." Responsibilities like not using powers to hurt others and fixing magical messes, the prices that come with the privilege of having magic.

"Anything could happen when Percy gets punished for what he did here," I continue.

“He may be allowed to keep practicing. That means he could still become an icebrand. My token is symbolic and has no actual blessing inside it. If he does magic without his token, he’s risking his safety and done for sure. Why would he cast anyway and blow his shot at gaining ice’s essence?”

For Percy, magic is everything. Any shot at ice magic is better than none. He probably thought he wouldn’t get caught here. But there’s no hiding the toll unsafe magical usage takes, it will always catch up to a caster eventually. And the elements always know anyway.

The wolves consider all this information. Crickets chirp in the distance. The younger kids who were playing games start heading inside the house.

”So,” Sam speaks first, trying to act casual. “We have Percy on ice.”

”Oh god.” Ewan’s already burying his face in his hands.

“You can go inside now,” the alpha dismisses Sam smoothly.

“Come on, I have more!”

“Start getting the others together. We need to make an announcement.”

“Fine. You ruin all my fun.”

“Well, if you’d rather stay and apologize profusely for how you treated Jack...”
Rowan offers slyly.

“Okay, okay I’m going.” Sam gets away from the table and then turns back, clearly pained. “Uh, about how I treated you... you know, it’s uh... it’s my bad.” He hurries away.

The alpha and Ewan seem pleased he was able to muster up a ‘my bad’, so I take the win.

“The hard jobs always fall to me,” the alpha jokes.

“You don’t have to apologize for them,” I say. “That’s the same as me apologizing for the actions of another wizard.”

“Except the wolves who treated you poorly are my pack, my responsibility. Their successes and failures are my own. They didn’t impress me today. Present company excluded,” he says with a glance to Ewan. Rowan’s eyes are warm when they land on me. “You, on the other hand, are an entirely different story. I’m grateful Ewan found you when he did.”

”T-thank you.”

“Thank you,” he says, speaking with gravity and authority. “You had no reason to stay and help us after how we treated you, yet you saved our land. Now we can stay together on the lands that our pack has always called our own. One apology isn’t enough for their behavior, but it’s a start. I’m sorry for the actions of my pack. The greeting they gave you was not what you deserved.” His somber attitude begins to lift. “Let’s correct that now. As far as me and my pack are concerned, you are always welcome as a friend and honored guest from this day forward.”

Wow. The praise, the feeling of accomplishment, and the sincerity of the alpha all leave a warm glowing feeling in my chest.

But in my life, it doesn’t matter how warm things seem. Ice is never far away. The alpha is full of apology and kind words, but Ewan next to me feels tense. Off.

When I glance over, he’s frowning. Something isn’t right.

* * *

“To Jack!” Sam cheers, raising his glass in a toast.

“To Jack!” a chorus of shifters echo back.

Everything progressed at lightning speed when Sam went inside to rally the troops. The pack leaped into action to celebrate the end of their troubles. Now I’m in the middle of a wild party in full swing.

Wolf shifters in their human forms drink and toast, clapping me on the back and cheering whenever they recognize me. I’m no longer a suspicious ice wizard. I’m a hero.

In the ensuing commotion, I lose track of Ewan and can’t find him anywhere.

“Come on,” Sam says. “You haven’t lived until you’ve played beer pong with wolves.”

“That may be true, but I think doing so could be what kills me.”

“Lightweight.” Sam rolls his eyes, though he’s still much friendlier than before. “You can be on my team. I got your back.”

My goal is to avoid playing beer pong with shifters with high alcohol tolerances, but it doesn’t look like I’m getting out of this. Actually, Sam’s insistence to include me now is rather sweet. I’m looking forward to being an unofficial member of the pack for the night.

“Why don’t you find a different partner?” Ewan suggests as he appears by my side. “Give us a minute, okay?”

Sam reads the situation and reaches an obvious conclusion. “He’s all yours.” He backs away from me slowly and sends me a wink.

Ewan isn’t looking to spend a private romantic moment alone with me though. He barely speaks or looks at me as he starts leading me away from the house and the party spilling out onto the lawn.

The farther away we go, the more I listen for Ewan’s footsteps to guide me through the dark. When I look back, the light from the celebration is hard to see. The house is lit up, and there’s a fire pit with healthy flames lighting up the dark night, but we’re far enough away that only a dim hazy orange reaches us.

It takes a moment to spot my car and realize this is why he brought us out here. He’s rushing me off.

“Don’t worry,” he says. “I’ll tell them not to get their hopes up about seeing you again.”

So much for celebration. Those words have me going cold all over.

“What, you don’t want to stay in touch?”

Ewan looks away down the road. “Think it’s better if you go.” He sighs. “Look, Brass is a bastard, but he’s right about one thing. You aren’t a great liar. I heard the end of your conversation with him. You were trying to remove the effects of my mark on you. It was a mistake. That’s why you came here.”

All at once, it feels like I’ve been caught in a lie. Guilt washes over me swiftly, even though this is just a misunderstanding.

”I-I wasn’t keeping it from you, not intentionally. Other things came up.”

"Well, I have something for you. This salve recipe uses simple ingredients you probably have on hand and should help heal the bite and other marks faster." He pulls a paper from his back pocket with the recipe. "Otherwise, just wait a few more days. Time will take care of it too."

Oh no. This looks bad. Ewan is playing it rather cool and not giving away too much but I clearly hurt his feelings. He thinks I was so desperate to remove the marks he gave me that I couldn't even wait for them to fade naturally.

"I'm sorry." I take a fumbling step towards him in the dark. "You thought I came to see you."

"No—"

"It's not that I didn't want to see you," I insist.

This is all going so wrong so fast. Ewan's bite below my shoulder was strong enough to tether me to the earth magic we both love, blocking my ability to cast other elemental magic. While it was a bit alarming when I didn't know what was going on, and the bite mark's effect on me was accidental, that doesn't mean it's a mistake. All the mark did was point towards something I wasn't able or wasn't ready to see yet.

"What I said to Percy, I didn't mean—"

"You don't need to explain." Ewan keeps us at arm's length, carefully switching our positions so the moon isn't at my back and I won't injure myself wandering to him without being able to see clearly. Though the look on his face makes me wish I was blind again. It looks so final. "I'm really glad we didn't stick to our arrangement and never see each other again."

"You are?" That wasn't what I expected.

"Yeah, you saved my pack. I'll always be grateful for that." He gently urges me towards my car. "But I think it's best if we go our separate ways after all."

"Oh..." Yep, that's what I was worried he'd say. Hearing it feels like the floor dropped out from under me. "That's what you want?"

Ewan nods.

His wishes hit me hard, and I lean against my vehicle to hold me up. This isn't where I saw the night heading at all. Ewan has his hands in his back pockets, not looking at me and waiting for me to get in my car and go. He's not unkind exactly, he could have been much ruder, but he's firm. Like we're over and done with and that's all there is to it.

I understand how it looks to him, but figuring out why my powers were stuck wasn't the real reason I came to see him. It was only an excuse, something that gave me a reason to do what I already longed to do. I wanted to see him again. But now I wonder if he feels the same. I was so sure he felt the same way in his truck but now...

I consider what he tells me. Getting into my car, driving away and never seeing him again. I seriously consider it. Then I realize something.

This is it. This is why Earth gave me the test it did. It told me to decide. Because I never go after what I want. I let others dictate what happens. Doubt and fear has stopped me for too long.

I'll never get closer to my dreams if I don't take steps to get there. In this moment, I could be on the verge of having everything. It all depends on whether I'm willing to go after what I want or not.

This whole adventure has made it abundantly clear that some things are worth

fighting for. There are some things I can't lose.

"Stay right there," I order. "Hold on a second."

I climb into my car, leaving the door open. I turn on the car and the headlights. For good measure, I put on the high beams.

"Ah!"

"Sorry, guess I should have warned you. Will you get used to the light?"

"What's going on, Jack?"

"We should have this conversation while we can see each other clearly. Leaving isn't what I want," I say. "This isn't what I want at all."

He squints and I hope he gets used to the light. I need him to see me and know I mean everything I'm about to say.

"Jack—"

"No, you had your say. This is mine."

I step into the light with him and blink hard, not used to the sudden change either. I want him to see me but I'm also literally in the spotlight, so my throat works futilely for a few seconds before I find my voice.

"I tell myself I'm torn between earth and ice. The truth is, I'm not. In my heart, I think I've known for a long time which element is right for me. I've just been too afraid to admit it. I put off deciding, like maybe if I give it enough time, I'll wake up one day and suddenly love ice magic more than anything else. Then I met you and

everything changed. You showed me all the things I always longed for and forced me to admit how right they are. You gave me a taste of what I could have, if only I were willing to go get it.”

“So you’re going to be an earthbrand?” Ewan puts it together slowly. “That’s what you want to tell me?”

“No.” Wait. “Well, yes, that is what I’ve decided.” Though right now, that isn’t the important part. “I want you in my life, if you’re willing to have me. If I don’t tell you this, I’m gonna regret it for the rest of my life. I’ll always wonder what could have been. I knew that the moment you left me behind in the hotel room. Even if you don’t feel the same, I can’t make that mistake again.”

Now I’m glad I can see him, his blue eyes and steady hands and everything I adore so much.

“I think you might be the real deal, Ewan. I’d like to find out. I think you’re who and what I’ve been looking for all along.”

Ewan stares at me for a long moment, totally unreadable. The silence is agonizing and there’s no indication of when it will end. Then his arms wrap around me and his mouth crashes into mine. I surrender to the passionate kiss for a few wonderful moments before gathering enough of my wits to pull back.

“Uh, so you agree with me?” I guess.

“Yep,” he says. Apparently, that’s it, and he joins our mouths once more.

Ewan’s hand cradles the back of my head, and his tongue in my mouth is making it incredibly difficult to focus, but I need to understand.

“Are you sure? I thought you were sending me away a second ago.”

He pulls back, realizing this is something we need to discuss.

“I like you,” he promises, thumb stroking over my lower lip as he looks deep into my eyes. “I want you to be here. But if you didn’t feel the same, I thought a clean break would be better, before... before I get in any deeper.”

“Yeah?”

“I realized it the second my pack chased you away.” He laughs dryly, ducking his head. “They started getting to me and I wondered how well I really knew you. I hesitated and you had to rescue yourself and get away on your own. My instincts were telling me I could trust you, but I let the others run you outta here and I felt like the smallest, sorriest excuse for a wolf in the entire world. I should have protected you, and that’s how I knew I had feelings for you. Some part of me already decided you were telling the truth, and I needed to listen and believe that you were who I thought you were.”

”Who am I?”

”Someone I’d like to know a lot better,” he says. “Someone I’m falling for.”

This time, it’s my turn to join our mouths together. It’s the best news I’ve heard in a long time. Ewan and I are finally on the same wonderful page.

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Navigating around the pack house in the dark takes a bit of time.

The party is still happening towards the front of the house as we try to quietly take our leave. Ewan and I are the big heroes of the night, so we can't allow ourselves to get drawn into the celebration again or we may not be able to get back out anytime soon.

We have other plans, like celebrating alone, just the two of us. Though I'm not quite sure where we're heading in the dark. I think we're going to his truck. Instead, he leads me to a back door.

He navigates through the darkened halls with ease, pulling me along after him. "Let's go upstairs. I have a room here."

"Do you live here full time?" I wonder.

"Yeah, for now. A subletter has my apartment until the end of the year. I moved back when the land started suffering. Lots of wolves stay here when they move out of their family home and become adults. It's a good way to save some money and gain some independence while still strengthening ties to the pack." He chuckles. "Though in my case, the alphas are my uncles, and the construction business I work at belongs to them and my dad. I've had a room here whenever I needed it since I was five."

Ewan was the spitting image of the alpha I had the most contact with so far, both in appearance and temperament. I wonder how similar his father looks to Ewan and Rowan and who he takes after more.

“You said you were close to the alphas. You’re really close, aren’t you?”

“Yeah, they’re basically my second set of parents, which has its good and bad qualities.” He squeezes my hand as he leads me up the stairs to another floor. “That’s something you can find out for yourself at a later date.”

“I’m excited to get to know them better and meet your parents. Well, I’m excited and terrified.”

“That sounds like a healthy reaction,” he laughs.

They are a group of protective werewolves and I desperately want them to like me, so that’s a tricky combination. I also look forward to meeting his sister. I already have the feeling she’ll be my ‘toughest’ audience as a protective older sister. I figure I’ll be able to win her over by how much I adore her brother. If that fails, we can laugh about the parts we played in the saga of Ewan’s sparkly pink hammer.

There isn’t more time to consider the future when we reach our destination in the present. Ewan stops in front of a closed door, the door to his room. A startling thought occurs to me, and I speak up before we go in.

“Are you sure we don’t need another hotel room? For privacy?” We’ll have the room to ourselves, but shifter senses pick up on more than human’s do.

Ewan shrugs off the concern. “We get real used to everybody knowing everybody else’s business. They won’t care what they hear.”

”Right... that’s... that’s fine,” I add hastily. ”There’s nothing wrong with enhanced senses. Nope, that’s a natural part of being a shifter. You’re totally comfortable walking around naked after shifting and knowing shifters hear everything and I...” I really want to go into Ewan’s bedroom so I’m trying to be cool with how wolves do

things.

However, I don't have as much practice being that open.

Ewan chuckles. "Just kidding, Jack. Don't faint on me."

"I wasn't going to faint!" Probably. "If I did, would you catch me?"

"Of course." He puts a hand on the back of my neck, his touch warm and steady.
"We can figure out privacy later. Good news is we don't need to worry about that tonight."

Before I can ask why, shouting and cheering sounds come from the front of the house. Someone turns up the volume on the music playing and several voices sing along.

"The party is in full swing," he confirms. "Nobody will hear anything tonight."

Good news, though I doubt much could stop us right now. I'd be mortified later, of course, if his pack hears us enjoying each other, but right now being with him is all that matters.

Ewan's room here has thankfully seen decorating changes since he was five. A red flannel shirt I recognize is on the bed and another is hung on the back of his desk chair. Two of many, I suspect. The room is neat and on the sparse side. There are sketches for construction projects on the desk.

I get the sense he basically uses the place to sleep and when he needs a moment alone but otherwise he likes to go be part of the pack. He probably isn't the loudest or liveliest part, but he's there in the heart of it all, soaking it in. I'd like to get to know that side of him better and see him in action with his pack... later. I'd like to do that

later.

A few seconds is all I get to look around before he's in my space trying to kiss the life out of me. He's also trying to remove all my clothing and deposit us on the bed at the same time. The urgency is a compliment, that he needs me that badly. It reminds me of our first night together in the hotel room.

Unlike then, we both admitted we have feelings for each other and that we're interested in more than a single night together, so there's no rush. We're both planning to do this again and again. We have time to explore this between us.

"Slow down, let's..." "savor this" sounds too cheesy. "Let's enjoy this."

"Sounds good." He rests his forehead against mine, taking a deep breath. "It's just, last time we did this, you said something about needing me inside you."

"Oh. I-I remember." My cheeks color. Saying it in the height of passion is one thing, but this is pre-passion. Was I really that blunt before?

"So, I'm really interested in following through." Yes, I feel his interest hardening against my thigh. "And it kinda feels like we've been waiting a long time to grant that request, so..."

Well, when he puts it that way. "You're right," I decide. "Let's go with your plan." We can go slow later.

We move quickly to get undressed and get on the bed, and I sigh in pleasure once we're naked and he's on top of me. Ewan knows exactly when to rush and when to go slow, because he isn't quite as desperate once he starts opening me up. His hands hold me like I'm precious, and he opens me with care, always watching me and my body attentively, he knows what I need even better than me.

We are face to face when he starts sinking inside me. Ewan has one of my legs hitched up to allow him room, supporting it with his arm, though I'll probably feel the strain if we stay in this position—we're absolutely staying in this position, I decide a moment later. Our faces are pretty close like this and he's looking at me with such awe. Totally worth any ache I feel tomorrow.

"God, this new look." His fingers brush against my forehead. "Your hair is so dark," he murmurs, running his free hand through it again.

"I know." The natural color hasn't fully sunk in for me either. "Every time I catch a glimpse of myself, I freak out and wonder about the dark cloud around my head and then realize it's just my hair."

"You don't like it?"

"I'm not used to it."

The conversation gives me a distraction as I adjust while he sinks inside me inch by inch. Plus, Ewan seems to enjoy this topic.

"Dark hair looks really good on you." He's gazing at me so fondly while filling me and the intimacy is a little intense but also incredible.

"But I thought you liked the white color?"

"Yeah, I do. You look like one of those icicles that hangs off of roofs in the winter."

With no idea how to take that, I tell him, "Your idea of bedroom talk needs some work."

He laughs and we shift a bit. Ewan tilts his hips forward to be flush against me as his

length rests fully inside me. I clench around him causing us both to stutter and groan. With some regret, he pulls his free hand away from my hair and steadies himself against the bed, preparing for what comes next.

Ewan only waits on me to start moving. I feel guilty about making him wait because it takes a few extra moments. How can I possibly catch my breath when he stares like that?

"Icicles are sharp, brittle things," he says. "Somewhere between harmless and dangerous depending on the circumstances. You were like a little icicle when we met. Makes me wanna take you between my hands and warm you up."

Okay, his dirty talk isn't so bad after all. He sounds so sexy when he describes warming me up even though I point out the flaw in his plan. "If I'm an icicle, then I'd melt."

"Yeah, I'm gonna make you melt alright," he promises, eyes searing me with the heat in them. "You're gonna come apart in my hands."

Nothing ever sounded better.

"Oh god, move," I plead. "You have to move."

He moves slowly at first, pulling out in order to push back in. I groan and grip his shoulders as he moves smoothly into a rhythm, nice and easy. Smooth rolls of his hips make pleasure spark inside me. The feeling builds little by little as he slowly winds me up like he's an expert and he could do this all night.

"Mmm." Little noises keep escaping my lips, I can't hold them back. "Yes, Ewan, you're... keep going..."

“God, you’re sexy,” he tells me. Not sure I’d ever been called that before, but it sounds like the best compliment in the world from him.

My head falls back on the pillow, and I surrender to the rhythm. I had an idea of biting him and making a few marks of my own like he did to me, but I can’t reach his neck from this position. I drag my nails across the planes of his shoulders instead.

I really hadn’t done this enough. Now I am learning all kinds of things about myself. I was sexy, apparently. And holding this position longer than I thought is not bad at all. I might have hidden flexibility I need to explore. And from the signs my body was giving me, I was getting very close to coming. Apparently, I may be one of those guys who could come untouched like this.

“You wanna come undone for me?” Ewan whispers, voice husky.

”Yes, I really do.”

Oh god, he knows exactly how to touch me, hitting just the right spot that sends shivers down my spine. I can’t help but moan in response, my grip on him tightening as I encourage him. I can’t hold back much longer.

“Oh, gonna, I need to—”

”Do it,” he commands. “Melt for me.”

I do, I melt into him. My cock jumps against my stomach and spurts, releasing without any help.

As I moan and tremble in his arms, Ewan drinks up every sound, rhythm only faltering once he melts with me as we both surrender to our release and the overwhelming pleasure that engulfs us.

With trembling limbs and ragged breaths, we collapse together onto the bed. His heavy breathing echoes my own as we both catch our breaths. My body still buzzes and tingles from my climax. I could get used to going to bed like this.

Ewan presses a kiss against my hair near my temple. “In case you were wondering, however you wanna color your hair is good with me. Bet you’d even look good with no hair.”

”No, thank you,” I manage.

”You’re still beautiful,” he continues.

”Not sexy anymore?”

“You can be sexy and beautiful, you are.”

I smile as my eyelids become heavy and fall shut.

Amazing as the release is, the best part is knowing we’re free to do this again and again and again. Tomorrow, the next night, and the night after that. With no more expiration date between us, the future is full of possibilities.

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Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:23 am

The early morning sun sneaks in through a crack in Ewan's blinds. I'm already awake to watch as it spills into the room. I ponder the clarity from last night. Am I still just as sure in the light of the day? Am I really set on becoming an earthbrand?

Ice is hard to separate from my parents and their expectations from me, but the truth is that ice is one of my favorite elements. Ice is beautiful. Under the right hands, what seems so stiff and not malleable can be transformed into a work of art.

Plus, ice magic is part of me. There's no changing that it's where I come from. I'll always love and respect ice magic.

But it's not where I belong.

As I wake up, I know. Declaring my feelings for Ewan isn't something I'll ever regret. And my decision to follow the path of the earth is the right one. There are no regrets. I stand by my choices.

There's no voice this time, just an awareness.

I look out the window and see flower blossoms perched on the windowsill, one of my favorites. A brilliant golden flower that darkens to deep orange at its center. Another tropical hibiscus blossom, like the petals that appeared when my test was issued, has appeared to tell me I passed. I don't grow these hibiscus plants in my garden because they have no practical purpose and growing it in this climate would take constant effort--or the right magic.

The flower tells me everything I need to know. I passed. Earth told me to choose. I

did. And now, now I can become an earthbrand.

“Tonight,” I say. Waiting any longer feels impossible. Fitting in everything I need to do to prepare to receive the brand will be tight. But I’m ready. I want it to happen.

“Tonight.”

Ice is the start of my journey, not the end. My future lies with earth magic.

When I think of the earth... when I think of Ewan... there are no words. The smile on my face and the warm feeling in my chest say it all. They feel right.

Sitting up and staring at the window, the flower is gone. Only one petal remains on the sill outside. I look down in awe at my right hand where the flower now rests.

Yep, tonight. Earth is ready for me and I’m ready too.

Mostly ready. There is a bit of challenging prep work ahead that must get done before accepting a brand.

”What’s going on?” Ewan murmurs, half his face smushed against his pillow.

”I have to go.”

”What, you’re leaving?” he rolls over to face me.

”There’s so much to do!” The mental list in my head grows longer with every second that passes. I throw the covers away and jump out of bed.

”The sun’s barely up.”

”And I need to get started too.” I’m glad Ewan is only half awake because I must

look demented rushing around his bedroom trying to collect my clothes and get dressed while making plans in my brain.

Ewan isn't the only one not totally awake. My pants are mostly on and I have one leg in the air when I realize how this looks, like I'm rushing to get out of here. I am rushing to get out of here.

"It's okay." I return to the bed and place a kiss on Ewan's bare shoulder. "I'm coming back."

"Good. I wasn't worried about that. But why do you need to get up now?"

Ewan stretches and sits up, the sheet around him slipping and pooling around his waist. I swallow hard, unable to offer any resistance when he pulls me onto the mattress. Staying in bed with him all day is tempting... No, I decided.

"There's so much I need to get done before getting my brand. Once I get ready, I'll meet you back here tonight."

"Okay. Hey. Tonight's perfect, it's a full moon. You're about the earth but us wolves like the moon too. It fits."

"So, you will help me embrace—"

Ewan smirks and pulls me back once more. "Oh, I'll embrace you."

"Embrace earth!" I correct.

"That too." He kisses my cheek, and his lips start moving down my jaw. "Love to be there."

“Good.” I take a deep breath and plan to extricate myself... I end up melting into his arms.

”Weren’t you about to leave?” he wonders with amusement.

“I am, in a second. I need this first. I need strength for what comes next.”

”What comes next? I thought you were done with the tests and jumping through all the elemental hoops?”

”I am. But I still have to tell my parents.”

Five more minutes in Ewan’s arms is necessary. Even with the decision made, telling them won’t be easy. Ugh.

Who knows? Maybe they’ll surprise me and accept my choices without question... I’m not holding my breath.

* * *

Mother drops her napkin on the table in surprise when I storm into the dining room. She raises an eyebrow. “Excellent timing, son. You arrived in time to join us for breakfast.”

“Why do you say that as though he didn’t spend the evening here?” Father wonders. He frowns when he sees me still in the same clothes as the night before. “You spent the evening here... didn’t you?”

“Young people get into all kinds of mischief under their parent’s noses,” Mother comments slyly. “Or has it been so long ago that you’ve forgotten?”

"I don't recall getting into any mischief." He clears his throat and sends my mother a stern expression. "Don't contradict me."

"We need to talk," I declare. "It's about the brand."

The mood in the dining room changes in an instant. I have their full attention. Being their focus isn't entirely pleasant, but telling them about my decision cannot wait.

Tokens and protections work together to keep novices safe. The protections that help prevent magic from overwhelming and hurting me need to be lifted before I can accept an element's essence. The element must be free to fill me, change me, and give me the strength needed to permanently wield magic. As the ones to place those protections, my mother and father need to undo them.

Clearing my throat, I dive in. "First, you both should know I take our family's history seriously and have nothing but respect for the Blanchard legacy. That's why this has been so difficult. But at the end of the day, I'm the one who earns a bond with the element. I'm the one who passes or fails their tests."

"It's true," Dad agrees. "In theory. But what have you recently done that actually brings you closer to a brand?"

"You're right," I say. "I was stuck for a while and not making any progress. I've always wanted to make you happy, so I dragged things out to avoid having to disappoint you. It took me awhile to admit the truth to myself. I think I've known for a long time what I really desire, and I've just been afraid to tell you the truth."

"Desire, is that it? You meet a man and now—"

"I-It's not about him," I stutter, surprised my mother knows. Then again, she knew I hadn't been home last night. "Well, it's not only about him."

I lift a hand before they can start firing off new questions. I take a deep breath and break the news. “I want to become an earthbrand. No, I’m going to become an earthbrand. Tonight.”

Both my parents freeze—uh, they stop moving. Mother’s fork clatters against her plate as she drops the silverware. An icy mist starts rising from my father, coalescing around his shoulders and head like the kind of steam that a furious person in cartoons starts spouting through their ears.

”You can’t, you can’t be serious.” Father’s normally stern expression goes slack, and his ever-present white hair suddenly makes him look much older.

”What, when did this happen?” Mother’s voice is faint as she raises a hand to her chest to steady herself.

“Earth gave me a test. I passed it. As soon as I’m able, I’ll accept its brand.” Tonight, with any luck. If my parents are over the shock by then.

They seem at a loss for words, so I nudge them in the right direction. ”You can do the reasonable thing and remove my protections and be happy for me.”

My parents blink in almost perfect unison as they struggle to process all my announcements. Their eyes dart to each other. After a round of silent conferring Father asks, ”And if we don’t?”

”You can scream, yell, and lock me in my room,” I say calmly. “It’s not going to change anything. When you’re done yelling and lecturing and ordering me to make the choice you did, you’re still going to undo the protections. Unless you’d rather I had no brand at all?”

...

Percy was right about one thing. A Brass or a Blanchard without a brand? Would cause quite the scandal. However, my parents might not be ready to listen to reason.

"There's no rush to lift the protections now," Mother says. "You can't handle exposure for long, the clock starts ticking immediately."

The longer a person remains unguarded and unbranded, the riskier it becomes. Not only has this person spent a lifetime courting magic and the elements, and therefore already sensitive to it, they are right on the cusp of something greater. This makes magic drawn to them even more.

A person should have a few days once the protections are lifted, which allows enough time to finalize arrangements for ceremonies and get the necessary people together. Casters should limit exposure to elements and magic until then. Some exposure can't be helped but the more magic and elements one is exposed to, the less time they have before it becomes too overwhelming.

"Your mother is right." Father's voice trembles as he struggles to remain calm. "Earth made you an offer, there's no need to rush into anything. Wait for Ice to make a competing offer."

"I don't need a test from Ice," I declare. "I already have the offer I want."

The shock on their faces begins to fade. Anger takes its place.

"No, absolutely not. You will not become an earthbrand!" Father bellows, his fists clenched at his sides.

"Yes, I will." My palms rest on the ice-encrusted table for support, but my voice stays steady and firm. "I'm meant to be an earthbrand."

"That is not your destiny," Mother interjects. "No, it's not possible."

"You'll change your mind," Father orders.

"I won't. I was given a choice and I made it. I'm sorry if this hurts you, but earth magic is my path now. There's no turning back."

"Is that so?" Father challenges me, his eyes narrowing.

I nod confidently, ready to face whatever consequences may come from my choice. Even if I lose the Blanchard name, and their support, even if they give me the cold shoulder for months, years... decades? They are quite good at the cold shoulder, after all.

But this isn't about them. After being so close to the beauty and potential of earth magic, how can I ever return to ice's permanent frost?

I wait for my parents to do their worst...

...

...

...

My mother turns to my father. "Where's the obsidian athame? Is it in the study?"

"Was it really the obsidian one? I thought we used the quartz."

"No, our best quartz tools aren't that old. We definitely used obsidian for Jack's protections."

Father rises from his seat and places his napkin on the table. "You interrupted us in the middle of breakfast," he says. "You're aware that food doesn't stay hot long in here. You really should have waited until after we finished eating."

"Uh, wait. What?" That isn't the response I expected.

"It is rude," Mother agrees. "You could have waited 10 more minutes."

What in the world is happening? Are they in denial? Did they block out everything I just said in some kind of icy, shared delusion?

"No, he comes in here making demands," Father complains. "And he expects us to deal with cold bacon and eggs."

"Bacon is bacon," Mother argues.

"Yes, but cold eggs are awful."

"You're right." She nods and looks at me with reproach. "Cold eggs are the worst."

My mouth drops open. No sound comes out.

"You and your wolf are treating us to a nice brunch within the week."

"Are, are you going to lift the protections?" I whisper.

"Oh, am I not moving fast enough?" Father throws up his hands as he leaves the dining room. "I'll get the knife. We'll have to lift the protections outside."

Mother sees my shock and gives me an amused expression. "Did you really think we'd allow you to abandon centuries of tradition for something you weren't

absolutely certain about, something you weren't completely devoted to?"

"I kind of thought you wouldn't allow me to abandon centuries of tradition," I admit.

"Yes, well. We probably tried a tad too hard to give you that impression." She hides a smile beneath her hand as she pops a piece of cold bacon into her mouth, signaling that she's aware them being a "tad" overbearing is an understatement. "We weren't going to let you give up the ice without a fight. All of us needed to be certain."

"But... you said..."

"Ice is what we know." She shrugs. "Why is it a bad choice?"

"It's not, it's just not for me."

"Yes, also a valid choice." She smiles at my shock. "You seem surprised. But tell me this, have you ever expressed your intentions to us before today?"

"...no."

"Exactly. Like I said, all of us needed to be certain about your decision."

Including me, she means. From their perspective, earth magic must have seemed like only a hobby, one that could have been interfering with a brand. They weren't sure what it meant to me because I'd been too afraid to share that with them.

"We offered you what we considered your best option," she continues. "You weren't offering another. It may look like you have plenty of time in your early 20's, but you must keep making progress and moving forward. Even making the wrong choices is better than standing still." She laughs. "That might sound ironic coming from an icebrand, but it's true. I've seen people miss out on magic and it's always hard. We

thought it best not to let you relax too much, so it would force you to do something and not be complacent while a brand passes you by.”

“Oh.” I numbly take a piece of bacon and chew it slowly, hoping some food will help me process this turn of events.

”The elements won’t consider you seriously until you’re ready and you can’t get ready by doing nothing.”

They were trying to keep me motivated. To go forward. All to ensure I kept getting closer to figuring out myself and working towards my brand.

When I hesitated, they were quick to step in with suggestions and even demands. But now that I’ve stood up to them and not backed down, now that they know there’s no changing my mind... it seems they have, for lack of a better word, thawed out.

”If you stood up to us at our most severe and unyielding, we’re satisfied you have the strength to follow your own path and take the Blanchard legacy in a new direction. You’re getting a brand, and it sounds like you’ve met a man,” she adds with a satisfied nod. ”Overall, we are quite pleased with this turn of events.”

”Oh, you didn’t have to go and tell him right away,” Father complains as he returns with the ceremonial athame in its case. ”Don’t we at least get to complain about it a while? Ice is losing one of its finest potential talents.”

”Considering what we put him through to get here, why wait?” Mother counters.

”I suppose you’re right. Hey, we put up a good fight, didn’t we?”

“Yes,” I agree. “Frighteningly good.”

“And you made a different decision anyway,” Father says. “What else is there to do? We know when to admit defeat.’

“You do?”

“No, not really,” he admits with an amused huff. “But we’re willing to make an exception for you.”

“I’m honored,” I say, though my dad still looks a tad bummed he missed out on the tail end of the conversation.

“If it makes you feel any better, we can critique Jack’s earth magic skills together,” Mother suggests.

“What? No, we aren’t doing that!” I protest quickly because I can already see my father taking an interest in the idea. “You’ve barely even seen me do earth magic.”

“Exactly,” Mother says with a sly smile. “The Earth is accepting you, but you’ll have your work cut out to master the element.”

I have an idea about that, but it’s not finalized yet. Need to run it by Ewan first.

“You will have some catching up to do.” Dad places a proud hand on my shoulder. “But you’re a Blanchard. You’ll pick it up quickly.”

My parents are not the impenetrable glaciers I once thought. I’m so excited I can’t stop grinning as I text Ewan the news and we finalize our plans to meet later.

I’m so close. All we need to do is lift my protections and then nothing will stand in the way of getting my brand and starting the next chapter of my life, with Ewan by my side.

* * *

“It’s a pity we aren’t in the front yard,” I tell my floating parents. “If only the neighbors could see this.”

“Be quiet,” my mother hisses, her eyes glowing with intense white light. “We’re almost finished.”

The protections shielding me from raw magical power have many neutral, strengthening properties that target magic as a whole, but the finishing touches for branded magic must always be tweaked and grounded in one element as much as possible to prevent strain on a caster.

The end result is quite a spectacle.

My parents have formed a circle of frost around me and they’re both floating outside the circle in the air. An icy blue-white glow emanates from them as they chant in low voices. Since they’re releasing me from the protections, we need to do this in the backyard since it’s less icy out here than inside.

“Whoa!” A shock of icy wind and snow rushes towards me.

Mother floats higher in the air as energy crackles from her. “We release you.”

The frost gathering around me parts enough to reveal my father on the other side of the circle.

Dad brings the athame down on the circle of frost. The circle shatters and the cold drains away. It’s done. My protections are gone.

“Now go get your brand,” Father tells me.

I'm free to brand and seek the earth's essence.

The authoritative magical aura drains from my father as he clears his throat and adds, "Are we correct in assuming that we are not invited?" Thankfully, he doesn't sound offended. "It is more challenging to connect with the essence of earth when one has an icy presence looking over their shoulder."

I nod, grateful they understand. "That's exactly why I'm not asking for the brand in my garden." The stiff presence of ice magic still lingers too close nearby.

My guest list is extremely small anyway. The only other soul invited is a certain wolf shifter.

We say our goodbyes and my parents head inside. I do stop by my garden first. For a while, this small garden was my one outlet, my way to connect with earth magic and be close to the natural flowers and plants that I love.

I have to take a moment and appreciate where I started before heading into the future. As I stroll through the rows, I smile at my thriving green charges. Instead of a small plot of dirt, soon I'll be connected to the whole earth.

A sudden gust of cold air makes me shiver. Huh, is the magic my parents cast still lingering? I still feel a chill from the other end of the lawn.

No, the chill persists and grows even stronger. Are my parents coming back? Did they forget something?

The energy approaching feels strange. Icy... yet wrong. When I venture past the hedge to meet them, only one figure approaches me.

Not my parents at all. It's Percy.

“What are you doing here?”

“We aren’t finished yet.” His voice is low and menacing as he stalks towards me. Why is he walking so fast?

When he reaches me, I see his face twisted with sinister determination and the weird energy clings to him like a cloak. Some combination of ice magic and malicious intent. Sweating and with bloodshot eyes, he looks deranged, a totally different person than the haughty, ruthless prick I saw earlier.

Percy blocks my path and grabs my arm, ouch, holding it much too tight. ”You”re going to help me.”

”No. Whatever you want, I’m not interested.”

“Ice told me no too. If I didn’t accept its decision, why would I accept yours?”

This whole situation is quickly shaping up to be quite alarming. Not good. My parents are inside the house, if I can just reach them...

“Percy, hold on. Wait, we can talk.”

“No, I must get what I deserve. Before it’s too late.”

I know exactly what he deserves, but before I can tell him to go to hell or use my magic against him, he releases me. I stumble backwards and fall down to the ground.

At least I’m free from his grasp. He stands over me with a triumphant look in his eyes as something hard strikes my head. I barely register the pain before the darkness descends.

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Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:23 am

My head is fuzzy, and the world looks the same when cracking my eyes open. I try to move, then find I can't go anywhere. I look down to find a heavy parka wrapped tight around me.

What? I never needed a parka before in my life. Snow covers my body like I fell asleep in a blizzard.

“What, where am I?” My breath creates a frosty puff of air when I speak.

The last thing I remember... My parents, telling them I chose earth magic and they... they accepted my decision. They accepted? Are my memories right?

Yes. They accepted my decision. I headed to meet Ewan... then what?

I headed to meet Ewan and then—Percy.

“Good, you're awake!” He looms over me suddenly, wearing a manic smile.

I jump and thrash at the sight of him, and the snow packed around me begins to give way.

”Stay put,” he orders, snapping his fingers.

In an instant, something coils around my arms and legs, constricting them tightly. Metal bindings chilled by the frost in the room secure me in place. Traces of the metal element run through his veins, just like the ice in my blood.

Where are we? Percy's room. That's where we are. His room of solid ice still stands. Worse than before, it looks like a cold front swept in and turned his room into an icy tundra. How?

"What are you doing?" I ask shakily, thrashing weakly against the bonds holding me.

"Don't worry about it," he commands firmly. "Just stay right there."

"Stop! You can't—"

"Can't? Of course I can," he replies casually. How can he abduct me and tie me up without blinking? It is, well... chilling. "Don't worry. None of this is happening. You're only having a bad dream."

"I'm not falling for that," I scoff.

He shrugs nonchalantly. "Fine, you're in a waking nightmare. Happy now?" No, not at all.

My head pounds where he struck me. I can barely think. I have Ewan's mark on me, but I can't feel my other tokens nearby. Percy probably took them. With so much snow and ice here, summoning earth magic will be a huge challenge in my current state.

A connection to the ice remains, running through my veins. The only way to remove it is by accepting the essence of another element. When tapping into the ice and trying to blow away some of the snow surrounding me, a glow near my feet illuminates the inert ice token I swapped with Percy's. It lays neatly on top of the pristine snow covering me.

He's done something to the token. Any time I try to cast, the token glows and nothing

happens. He's blocking my magic. I'm bound and helpless.

Percy's own ice token remains safely in the custody of others. So how is it so freaking cold?

The head injury or the biting chill that goes so deep even I'm aware of it means that it takes far too long for me to put the pieces together. It doesn't click until I watch Percy create a solid block of ice in front of my feet.

"W-what, no... Your token—" The token with ice's blessing that allows him to cast safely is gone. He's casting anyway.

"Yes, you stole it. Removing the wolves is a lost cause since you caught me, but I won't give up on the rest." He mutters to himself as he positions the ice block with his illicit powers, sliding it until it stops against the soles of my shoes. "Not the first setback, doesn't matter, none of it matters... Nothing will stop me. Nothing, nothing..."

"You're hurting yourself," I realize with horror. "Stop casting! You need a token; this is too dangerous. You're risking your life, your brand. Why in the world—oh."

Percy said something when he found me. The Ice told me no too. If I didn't accept its decision, why would I accept yours?

Realizing the truth, I ask, "Ice—the Ice rejected you?"

"I know!" he crows with a cackle of mad laughter. "It surprised me too. There's no reason."

"You're insane. That's reason enough." Failing a test means a caster can try again later. Rejection is final.

”What better show of devotion than to be willing to risk my sanity, my health, my very life to change Ice’s mind?”

When I told the wolves that Percy was taken care of with his token gone, it was supposed to be the truth. He’d never risk the brand. But I didn’t have the whole picture. He already lost his chance at an icebrand. Percy had the option of finding another element, metal perhaps, but... instead he did the unthinkable. He went rogue.

He decided he’d rather have ice magic instead of any other element. Now whether he could see it or not, he was paying the price. We both were.

Creating this ice laden room, using magical frost to damage the wolf’s land, every single time he’s cast since rejection just digs him deeper and deeper. Being without the token simply escalates the process. He’s already deteriorated so much since I saw him last.

Without magic to depend on, I lick my dry lips and try to get assistance the human way. “H-help, help!”

”Oh, shut up,” he scolds. “My father is, grudgingly, on my side. He hid news of my rejection from everyone, even my own mother.”

What? Why would he do such a thing? The parka providing some protection only helps so much. The cold is starting to sink in under the layers. All I can whisper is, “Why?”

“Come on, Jack, you must understand.” Percy looks disappointed in me for not getting it. ”I’m a Brass. Do you think branding in my second choice will spare me the shame and humiliation of being rejected? A Brass cannot be unworthy of an element, it’s a disgrace. My father agreed and realized we could solve several problems at once. He made sure no one else knew about the Ice’s decision and hid me here while

I worked on getting a second chance. In exchange...”

“In exchange,” I fill in, “You’d finally drive the wolves away from their land here at your exclusive vacation home.”

Percy’s father helped him hide Ice’s rejection and in exchange Percy takes care of his father’s wolf problem. That way they each get something they want while buying more time to try to prevent the public humiliation they so fear suffering.

I was right when I concluded that ice magic was everything for Percy. Any shot at ice magic is better than none. He can’t handle the rejection and is desperate to believe there’s still a chance.

Suddenly I understand why us casters are supposed to have support systems and more in our lives than just magic. Percy only has ice magic and his father enabled his disillusion instead of making him face reality. I’d feel bad for him, if he wasn’t holding me hostage in this frozen deathtrap.

“I’m Ice”s most loyal follower. No obstacle will stop me.” He scowls at me. “...But your family kept getting in the way.”

“We did?”

“I told my mother I needed privacy to focus on branding, which did not stop her from telling her friends I was home.” Including my mother. The rest is obvious. They only sponsored Percy long-distance because they trusted his parents. They still demanded to see him whenever all three of them were on the same continent. “Gwendolyn demanded an appearance. I was supposed to have lunch with you first and then all four of us would get together and figure out exactly what you and I were missing and what we needed to do to brand.”

However, I had disrupted those plans by skipping our lunch, unintentionally doing Percy a favor.

He chuckles, finding a silver lining in my actions. "I planned to say hello, pretend everything was fine to buy some time, and then stall and make myself scarce. You ditching me gave me a wonderful excuse to avoid your family without arousing suspicion." He was snubbed first, by me, so we thought nothing of it when he avoided us.

Percy creates another block of ice, boxing me in further. I have no idea what he's doing, but it can't be good. The snow goes up to my shoulders and a block of ice barricades me on all sides. The only clear area is the space above my head, though he stands over me and blocks out everything else.

A parka can only offer so much protection when buried under heaps of snow in a giant snow globe. The first tremor shudders through me. The cold is getting to me?

All this is more than I can handle, apparently. My natural tolerance for ice has hit a breaking point...the cold hurts. I shiver and feel the awful chill of being surrounded by snow and ice. Once I start shivering, I can't stop.

Will he really bury me in snow and create an icy tomb around me?

"How will killing me solve anything?" I wonder.

He ventures closer to gape at me. "I'm not trying to kill you, Jack. You're unprotected. I saw the end of the ritual. You're unprotected and my actions are catching up with me. We're in quite the predicament, aren't we?"

"So stop it," I plead. "Save us both."

“Don’t you see? The Ice likes you, I feel it. It will accept you if you let it.”

”N-n-no, I-I—”

”God, why are you shivering?” He laughs and spreads his arms. “All this ice and my body feels like it’s on fire. How are you cold? I’m burning up, but it doesn’t matter. We’re so close. You can save us both, Jack. All you have to do is accept the ice element. Then the cold won’t hurt you. Once I deliver the caster Ice does want, it will see I’m worthy and take me too. God, why is it so hot in here? I like it cold!” He fires a jet of frosty mist into the air.

Surrounded by so much snow and ice that even I feel it, yet Percy doesn’t. He wants ice magic so badly he’ll do anything and he can’t even feel the cold in his glorified snow globe of a room. It appears he’s been given the opposite of what he desires. The more he tries to create cold, his body gets hotter. I’m freezing and he’s burning.

See, this is exactly why you don’t piss off the elements.

“Come on, Jack. Accept Ice. You’re the one with the power to save us both.”

I shake my head weakly.

A flash of anger crosses his face when I’m not convinced. “Stop looking so pathetic and helpless! Ignore the pain. All you have to do is ignore the pain! Soon, this really will just be a bad dream. We won’t hurt anymore, we’ll both be icebrands, and all this will seem so silly.”

Some method lurks in his madness after all. With my protections lifted, all this concentrated snow, ice, and ice magic is too much for me to withstand. The overexposure to this element has dwindled the grace period I have before branding down into nothing. I need a brand fast. But accepting the earth’s essence is not an

option in his ice palace. If Percy can force me to accept an icebrand, he believes the Ice will welcome us both.

That's actually a pretty good argument. Either that or I'm as bad off as him. I don't even know if it's possible for me to accept ice's essence. The element never tested me. I'm almost positive that he's never ever going to see any brand, including ice. But still, it's a pretty good argument given the shape he's in.

"Percy, none of this will work if the cold kills me first."

"That's a chance I'm willing to take."

No, there's one last hope. I have to use it to stay strong.

"Y-you won't win... E-Ewan w-will come... h-he'll find me." The words are an incredible strain to get out, but he's my last hope. We set up a time and place to meet. He's helping me get my brand and then we're celebrating together. He knows I won't miss that. He knows I'm meeting him.

I just have to remember that Ewan is on his way. When I don't show up, he'll come looking. I only need to hold on. Hold on long enough for him to find me.

"Who's insane now, Jack?" Still him.

But even the chattering of my teeth has stopped now... that is probably a terrible sign. I can't speak. I can barely muster enough energy to glare at him.

"You're an indecisive little wannabe wizard," he gloats above me. "I sent Ewan a text from your phone while you were knocked out. I told him you changed your mind and couldn't abandon the ice after all. Why would he doubt that? You weren't willing to fight for what you wanted for so long. He's probably expecting just such a text from

you. He's not coming. No one is."

I wish I could deny that. We confessed our feelings to each other, and we promised to meet. He'll come looking. He must know I wouldn't change my mind, not again after everything. But I'd been so conflicted and unsure, wavering and never going after what I wanted. What if Ewan thinks I got caught up in the excitement last night and now in the light of day I panicked and changed my mind?

If he got a text from my phone...I don't know. Maybe he will have doubts or eventually realize something doesn't add up. But time isn't a luxury I have. By the time Ewan realizes, it will be too late.

My defenses are down and all the ice keeps gnawing at me. Percy stands proudly above me, smirking down at me being trapped.

"Embrace the Ice, Jack. Save yourself while you still can."

The final block is ready. Percy removes the metal bindings and the ice token at my feet that he used to block my powers. He lifts the last ice block by hand cheerily and puts it over my head. Percy fuses all the blocks in place, creating a seamless tomb of ice, whistling a peppy tune to himself all the while.

* * *

My ice prison is cold and dark. If a rescue from Ewan isn't a certainty, I need to... do something... I can't just freeze to death.

But I can barely move. Barely think. Everything hurts. The stupid pain won't be ignored... with a supreme amount of effort, I raise a hand and pound on the block of ice closest to me.

Okay, instead of pounding, my hand presses feebly against the ice. Am I doing magic? I try to do magic... nothing happens, which is not a huge surprise. Several attempts to use ice magic fail.

I manage to shape my fingers into a fist... I do not think I will be able to unclench my hand anytime soon, but I make a fist and dig it into what remains of Ewan's mark on my chest. I press against the bite and try, try to cast earth magic... I can't, I can't keep...

A voice says something, too far away to be heard. If Percy is boasting or sharing more delusional wisdom, then I'm glad this ice prison is thick enough to drown him out. Small mercies.

I think... I think this is it.

I'm alone in the dark. I don't know where Ewan is. I hope he's coming. I wish I could see him again. If only I could tell him I didn't stand him up, that I was so excited to meet him. After hardly being away from him for a day, I still couldn't wait to see him again. He needs to know that but... my eyes close...

The chill around me lessens... it isn't warm exactly but neither am I so cold. Oh god, that can't be a good sign. Strangely, though... I feel safe, almost protected. I still can't really move but I don't feel as tired. It's easier to think.

Stay with me. We need to talk.

The voice from before comes back. It just gets louder.

You're in trouble.

Duh. I know that. But that's what the voice is saying. The voice? Maybe it's my own

thoughts. I'm probably hallucinating.

Pay attention. You're in trouble.

"Oh, go away!" I growl.

I'll forgive the insolence, given the circumstances.

The words come from nowhere. They aren't spoken out loud but in my head. Am I going crazy... or is something really happening?

No need to waste effort talking when the conversation is taking place in my head. I think what I want to say instead. 'Hello? Who are you? How am I hearing you?'

Given your state, this honor is clearly wasted on you. I rarely give voice to my wishes. Forces should speak for themselves through action.

'Ice,' I think. 'You're Ice.'

Obviously. There is no need for introductions. We aren't strangers. I've known you your whole life. I've always been a part of you.

I'm not alone in the cold and dark. Ice is here with me. Ice is also killing me, but it's still comforting to think the element is here. I was born with Ice's blessing in my veins, so it seems almost fitting to go out with it surrounding me too.

No, you aren't dying. Not yet. I've bought you as much time as I can. Can you stop being so human and frail and listen to me?

Oh, the Ice pulled me back from the brink?

Ice is talking to me and it has... a voice of its own. A cold, impassive voice that whispers dryly. Traces of humor occur, but no warmth, like the element is totally unconcerned with the life-or-death situation taking place.

In fact, all my 'human' worries only seem to annoy Ice. Oh god, I'm annoying an element... oh dear. 'Sorry?' I think. 'I'm very, very sorry.'

Things have gotten quite carried away, haven't they?

Yes. And I remember exactly who's responsible for my frosty tomb. 'Percy. You can't give him what he wants!'

You're quite dizzy, aren't you? I suppose I'll forgive that too. He will never wear my mark. Ruthlessness has its place, of course, but it also has limits. He does not. My decisions are final.

Good call. Except... 'His plan worked. You're here. You came.'

Not for him. I came for you, Jack.

Should I be proud or worried? I remind the Ice, 'No, I want earth magic. I choose the earth element.'

Yes, you did. You passed its test. That's truly something to be proud of. Earth and I both have our places in the world after all.

'I already decided—'

You chose what you wanted, the element corrects. But we don't always get what we want, do we? I'm here to offer you a chance.

‘I’m sorry it’s not going to work out. We-we aren’t right for each other.’ This is unbelievable. Freezing to death, I’m trying to let an element down gently.

No, no, I’m not here simply to give you a chance to change your mind. I’m offering you a chance to survive.

Oh. The situation is exactly as dire as I feared. The Ice is here because it’s my only hope?

Adversity can foster all sorts of partnerships. This isn’t what you’d select for yourself, but you are freezing to death, and I’m the one who’s here. I never had the chance to offer you a challenge, so I suppose it’s this... survive. Accept me and the cold will not harm you. You will live. That’s all I ask of you. Survive this. Embrace me and survive this. Be strong enough to do what you must to keep going.

All my defenses are down. The magical and physical damage is heavy. I can’t escape this on my own. But Ice thinks there’s still a chance. Accepting its essence will allow me to live...

There are no takebacks. I’d be alive as an icebrand wizard. I would be an icebrand forever.

“I-if, if,” this is important enough that I need to say it out loud. “If I become an icebrand, can Ewan and I still be together?”

Human hearts are not something I have the power to foretell with any certainty. The element thinks over the question anyway, trying to give me an answer. Such a partnership seems destined to fail. Wolves do survive in the winter. They survive, but they do not thrive.

Then the decision is clear. “I’ll take my chances without you.”

Even if this kills you?

I decided what I wanted. I want Ewan and earth magic. Even if I can't survive this...

"I know what I want and I won't be afraid of the truth again." Even if it kills me.

I really hope this doesn't kill me, of course.

I just need to... I need to find a way out of this and... sleep. No, that doesn't sound right. I'm impossibly tired all of a sudden. It's been creeping up on me, getting harder to ignore. I must resist... I need to...

Hmm. You know, you aren't alone in here.

Without much energy left and with my decision made, I switch back to thinking instead of talking. 'Because I have you for company? Not very reassuring.' I'm getting a bit too comfortable talking to the Ice. 'I know, I know, you'll forgive me that one too?'

No, that one I quite understand. I was talking about the people on the other side.

'What, like, the spirit world?'

No, the other side of me. I cannot simply let them enter, but... oh, what's that over there? Hold on a moment.

As if I can do anything else.

Aha. I found something that may help. Consider it a parting gift.

What—oh. A burst of color against the relentless white. Ewan's pink hammer materializes out of thin air, summoned by the very element that threatens to end me.

No, Percy threatens my life. The Ice serves as an unwilling co-conspirator, one that may have just leveled the playing field.

The sparkly pink hammer is in my hand.

I think about the warmth of Ewan's smile, how it felt to create a magical garden with the man, and his sandy blond wolf form. I remember his mark is already on me, a warm, welcome reminder of our connection to each other and the earth. With every ounce of strength left in me, I channel my magic into the hammer.

I swing the hammer at the wall of ice trapping me. Earth magic, my chosen affinity, surges through my veins and into the hammer, driving away the icy chill.

The impact sends a crackling energy through the prison walls. The ice shudders and cracks.

"Break," I command, my voice hoarse but determined. I strike again. The icy prison relents, melting away from me drop by drop.

As the frigid barrier weakens, a faint scratching noise pierces the silence. Someone is on the other side, chipping away with urgency.

Strong hands dive through the icy slush and pull me free. Still in Percy's icy lair, the room around us is cold but my head is on Ewan's lap. Ewan's hands are warm on my face.

"Ewan," I mumble, disoriented. "How did you...?"

He silences me with a gentle touch. "Don't worry about that now. You're safe."

"But how did you get past Percy's traps?"

“I didn’t.”

”I-I”m hallucinating,” I whisper.

”Hey, can you feel this?” His fingers trace a path down my cheek. “I didn”t bypass the traps; I charged right through them.”

“Ewan! Are you hurt?”

He chuckles lightly, even though I can see the pain in his eyes. ”I”ll be fine.”

”Really?”

”Of course. As long as you”re safe.”

With no way to detect or get around the traps, he ran right through them. Ewan was willing to get hurt and deal with the metallic barbs that the traps delivered because he had to get to me. I try to move and check his injuries, and my world spins before my eyes.

”Hey,” Ewan says urgently. ”Stay with me.”

”You”re here,” I murmur. “You came.”

He smiles, his eyes filled with warm humor. ”We had a date, remember? I knew you wouldn”t break it.”

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:23 am

The details blur together after Ewan and I managed to thaw and chip away the ice enough to reach each other. I remember his arms wrapping around me, so warm and real I wanted to cry, the relief of realizing that I was safe... the rest isn't so clear.

Healing and bed rest comes next. When I come to my senses during the first week, it's not so bad passing the time by cuddling up in bed with Ewan for over a week. We spend so much time talking and watching our favorite movies together while I rest and recover. I loved hearing his stories about growing up as a shifter and the mischief he and his packmates used to get up to.

More than two weeks of monitoring and bed rest are required before I'm deemed strong enough to resume my normal life... though my entire life is about to change as I accept the Earth's transformation. Some protections against magic were put in place as I recovered, though I am once again unprotected and open to magic and the elements.

Ewan drives me to his pack lands while I try to be patient. I'd been so unsure of my decision once. I longed for and feared becoming a real wizard at the same time. After I made up my mind, the time it took to get here was less than a month but felt like a tortuous eternity.

Finally, we arrive and set out into the forest. The same forest Ewan has roamed since he was a little boy. I want to see every inch, learn all the places he loves, and find my own best spots. We trek through the trees on foot, following the path for hikers and vacationers. I don't stop smiling.

"Just a bit further," Ewan says as he guides us through the trees. "I won't lie, I love

the idea of you and Earth partnering here on my pack's land. Are you sure this is the right spot though?"

"Yes." No doubt in my mind.

"You've been here a handful of times and not all of them were good. There isn't another spot?"

"The university hasn't removed the garden we created. They haven't asked any earthbrand to remove it either. But they also roped off the area because they don't want people getting used to it before the final decision."

In the event the parking lot won instead, losing the garden will be a much harder blow if I brand there too.

This forest, at least, I can keep coming back to. No member of Ewan's pack will ever corner me or send me away again. I'm now as welcome as any of them.

"Watch your head." Ewan holds a branch out of the way as we switch from using a walking path to going off the trail.

We pass a thin looking fir tree and I shudder, feeling a chill. Our journey has led us to an area where the damage from Percy's magic lingers heavily over the land and trees. I run my fingers over the bark of the sickly tree.

"Don't worry, Jack. Sights like that are less common than they used to be. We had help stopping the worst of the damage but are taking the rest slow. Some magical fixes have had to wait until we can get an earthbrand we trust here to tackle the rest." He nudges me with his elbow to clue me in that I'm the earthbrand they hope will help with the rest of the revitalization. It sounds like I'll be busy once I receive my brand.

“Did I tell you yet?” he continues. “Mr. Brass admitted everything quickly. He probably hoped that confessing would prevent people from digging deeper into the skeletons in his family’s closet. It didn’t work. Our feud looks like the tip of the iceberg. That family is no stranger to dirty tricks. Their secrets are coming to light now and they’ll be held accountable.”

Percy was already being held accountable, at least by the elements. After our final confrontation, he’d been taken to a healing center where magical professionals could monitor him, but they can only do so much. Time and the elements will decide whether his fever-y delirium passes and he regains his sanity.

There’s a reason we brand and use magic in certain ways. We need restrictions and limits for safety. Percy is one of the few modern casters who tried to rewrite the rules to suit his own needs. No caster has ever succeeded at getting magic that way, and Percy is no exception.

As I look around, it appears that Ewan is right. Things are looking up.

The forest stretches out around us, a mix of robust trees and emaciated husks that withered under unnatural frost. There are patches of gray and brown amidst the sea of green, remnants of the damage that was done to this land. However, the skeletal trees with their branches bare and lifeless seem less oppressive than before.

Healthy land is beginning to eclipse the sick parts, and there are also signs of new life. Young saplings sprout up and wildflowers bloom in vibrant colors. A testament to the forest’s resilience and determination to heal.

“Alright, here we are.”

We have to step carefully as a few fallen tree trunks are hidden in the undergrowth. Once we clear the fallen logs, Ewan indicates that we reached our destination.

Towering trees and intense undergrowth surround me. The melody of a nearby stream trickles gently. Sunlight filters in through the canopy of leaves above. It feels like we're in the heart of the forest.

"Is this the place you told me about?" I ask. "Your best hiding spot for hide and seek?"

"As a kid," he stresses. "You have to say it was my best hiding spot as a kid. Us adult wolves don't just play never ending games of hide and seek all day long."

"You did as a kid." And judging by his reaction, I guess the adult wolves sometimes let themselves be 'roped' into playing with the younger pups.

"Are we too close to the stream?" he wonders, changing the subject.

The stream must be just beyond the cluster of trees up ahead, but it feels more like a natural part of the forest than the intrusion of another element. Hollow logs with musky moss growing over them and the noise from the stream were probably why this was the perfect spot for a young Ewan to hide and escape the notice of the other wolves.

"It's perfect," I say. "If I had chosen the ice element, my parents would have arranged a grand ceremony where prominent icebrands watched me chant and spill blood upon an altar made of ice."

"Having to perform for a bunch of stuffy ice casters while you receive your brand doesn't sound like something you'd enjoy."

"You're right about that," I confirm. "An intimate ceremony with just the two of us is exactly what I want."

Ewan's adventures playing hide and seek with his pack while he was growing up are one of the stories he shared with me as I recuperated. Once I heard about his favorite spot to hide out in, it was like something slotted into place and I knew where I had to get my brand.

Standing out here with leaves under my feet, surrounded by the forest, I'm right where I need to be. And so is Ewan, next to me.

"Let's do this." I start calling earth magic to me.

"Oh," Ewan murmurs by my side, picking up on something in the air.

Casting out all my senses towards the forest around me, the sights, sounds, and smells of my immediate surroundings are most prominent. Then something magical takes hold. I feel connected to not just the area nearby but the whole forest. My senses feel sharp and attuned to everything, every twig, blade of grass, and insect and critter in the whole forest.

For a brief moment, my senses are sharper than Ewan's. Earth and its magic are practically leaping out towards me and all I have to do is accept the invitation it extends.

Time for Ewan's role in the proceedings.

"Okay," I say. "Your turn."

Branding involves a visible mark of power, like a token permanently carried both within us and on our bodies. My parents have their snowflakes.

My mark will be different.

I already know one marking that connected me to the earth and left a huge impression on me. All I have to do is make the mark permanent. Infused with earth magic, it will stay preserved on my body and connect me to my element forever.

“Brace yourself, this might sting.” Ewan pushes my shirt down, exposing the skin under my right shoulder. The same place he left an accidental mark before.

This time, it’s completely intentional when he lowers his lips to the skin there and bites down. I feel his teeth sink in, but there’s so much adrenaline, magic, and excitement coursing through me that I barely feel the pain.

The magic inside me intensifies as it rushes to the bite mark he creates and infuses the imprint of his teeth. I feel it sear through the mark and permanently ink his bite there on my skin.

Maybe it’s risky to have my brand take the form of his bite mark. We haven’t known each other that long. But it doesn’t feel wrong. Both my head and heart are telling me this is the perfect symbol of my connection to the earth. A symbol that connects me to the earth, magic, and Ewan all at the same time.

Ewan’s human teeth leaving a mark on my shoulder obviously won’t turn me into a werewolf. If it did, I’d already be sprouting fur and howling at the full moon. But since this is part of my branding ceremony, his bite will turn me into an earthbrand. I feel it happening. The earth gives me its blessing and the power I need to wield earth magic.

Thinking back to the sickly fir tree we passed to get here, I send energy flowing towards the tree. I feel the thin branches start to thicken and sprout new green needles. The once dull bark turns a warm brown.

”Wow,” Ewan says beside me, his voice filled with wonder. ”Absolutely incredible.”

I turn to him and grin, seeing that he's not talking about my magic with the tree. He's looking right at me.

The process is complete. The earth element rests in me, a warm pool of potential that reminds me of flower petals, leaves, and even the pounding of four padded paws over the dirt and grass of the earth.

"I did it," I say just to hear the words. "I'm an earthbrand."

Ewan watches me with beautiful blue eyes and a proud smile. "You did it."

"What do you think?" I ask him.

He watches me very carefully as he thinks over his answer. Is it a hard question? Am I really that different already?

"I think you're going to be very, very dangerous," he decides.

Whoa, not what I expected to hear.

"Hey, people who use magic aren't perfect. We're just like anyone else, most of us are decent people and some aren't. But I promise I'm still the same! The Jack you met hasn't changed. I just have an earthbrand now. I still have absolutely no interest in using my magic to hurt anyone or anything." Percy and his family's dirty tricks set a bad impression, but he does not represent all of us. His ruthlessness and refusal to listen to the elements is what drove him mad and kept him from ever receiving their blessing.

Ewan only grins at me. "Spoken like a true earthbrand."

"Thank you." Despite his weird answer, I had to smile. "I am an earthbrand."

“You are.” He smiles back, hands cupping my face. “You smell amazing.”

The sweet kiss he gives me only lasts a second as I realize what he meant before.

“Oh! You meant I’m dangerous to you? Good dangerous?”

He wasn’t making a comment about Percy or what I’d do with my powers after all. He was saying he liked my new scent.

“Very good,” he promises with a throaty chuckle.

“Has my scent changed completely or something?”

“Well, you carried a fair bit of ice on your scent before.”

“What does ice smell like?” I wonder.

Ewan’s head tilts as he tries to answer. “Kind of like nothing, but a nothing where you know there’s something there?”

“That’s what I smell like?”

“You did.” His thumb strokes over my cheek tenderly. “Now you smell like that amazing moment when everything thaws out and you know winter is over and spring is here.”

“I smell like a moment?” I ask.

“An amazing moment.”

Our lips join and it feels like the warmth glowing in my chest could make all the flowers in this forest bloom. I can do anything with earth magic and him. While

nothing can change that I came from icebrands, the traces of ice they left in me no longer have the same power. I can't use that connection to ice anymore. It's been replaced by earth magic.

There are so many possibilities open to me now. I can't wait to discover them all. Right now, I don't want to do anything but this.

I understand exactly what Ewan means as we keep kissing. My heart feels just like the moment when winter ends and spring is here to stay.

* * *

When my parents arrive to meet Ewan's family and his pack, my mother steps right out of her vehicle and into a puddle of mud. Her champagne-colored pumps will never be the same.

I hope this isn't an omen for things to come.

Mother only shudders briefly and soldiers on, and I don't question why she thought semi-elegant footwear was appropriate for a barbecue. In her defense, I doubt she's attended one before.

"Relax." Ewan wraps an arm around my shoulder as we follow them up the path to the backyard. "Everyone will get along fine. Your parents are nice."

"You think my parents are nice?" I stop in my tracks, sure I haven't heard him right. "I can't imagine what they were like while I was hurt... That's a total lie, I imagine they were quite high strung."

Ewan gives me a knowing smile. "Just like you."

”But you still find that charming in me, don’t you?” I ask, needing reassurance.
“Right? Am I still charming?”

He chuckles lightly. ”Incredibly so. And your parents have their own charms.”

“They do?”

“You were hurt,” he reminds quietly. “Them being high strung seemed pretty normal.”

“Right, yeah.” An injured son does warrant high strung behavior. “But if they’re still high strung now...”

Ewan pulls me to him, wrapping his arms around my midsection. “Relax, we get along just fine. In a very twisted way, Brass brought the three of us together. I was trying not to freak out while you were recovering, but all I could think about was you and how much I needed you to be okay. Nobody else got that better than your folks. So yeah, we bonded and we’re all good.”

“Oh. Good.” The thought really warms my heart, but ‘good’ is all I can manage.

Now that I’d finally declared my decision and was an earthbrand, my parents were... they were the same people and yet I was also getting to know them all over again.

We really should catch up with my parents, but in Ewan’s arms with his eyes happy and bright because I’m healed and in one piece, we enjoy a few moments to ourselves. Leaves crunch underneath our feet as we linger on the garden path, and the vibrant energy of the pack lands buzz around us with a natural presence that calls to me.

Not even a single cloud lingers in the sky today. The bright sunny day is the best

weather we can hope for when the Oakley pack is hosting a barbecue. Shifters and friends of the pack gather on the lawn behind the main house and enjoy themselves. None of them seem bothered by the muddy state of affairs that carries over from a storm yesterday.

Sam is manning one of the many grills. Casting a mischievous glance at my prim and proper parents, he makes a decision. "I'm gonna bring them a plate of the messiest ribs ever. Let's see what happens."

"Sam," Ewan warns.

"What, you don't wanna see that?"

"...Maybe," Ewan admits. He laughs when I give him a look of betrayal. "Relax, this is gonna be great."

Aiming for 'good' or even 'fine' seems much more reasonable. 'Great' is overly ambitious.

When introducing my parents to Ewan's uncles, none of them know what to do with each other. Both pairs stare at each other for a good fifteen seconds of silence while I wonder if I should create a minor mudslide and call this whole thing off.

It's awkward.

Rowan recovers first, greeting them with a broad grin and firm handshakes. "We're delighted to have you here. It takes an exceptionally strong person to overlook the rocky start our pack had with Jack and come to our rescue regardless. You've raised an extraordinary man."

"Thank you." Father's polite nod is a huge show of respect for him. "We feel the

same, given your son barreled through traps and kept on going to rescue our son when he was in trouble.”

”No, hold on,” Mother says immediately. “That’s not right.”

Oh God. “Mom—”

“These are the alphas,” she hisses urgently under her breath. “They aren’t Ewan’s parents.”

”Really?” Father turns slightly to confer with his wife. “I thought they were the parents.”

Her hair stays perfectly in place as she shakes her head in exasperation. ”I’m certain they’re the alphas.”

”Then they’re the parents and the alphas, so what?”

”So what? We’re here for 15 seconds and you’re already committing a faux pas. We want them to like us.”

We can all hear their mini argument, even me. From the alpha’s expressions, the effect of my parent’s overdramatic, whispered argument is somewhat charming. They were probably expecting stiff, uptight ice types.

My parents are that, but it’s clear they also care about making a good impression here.

”We’re the alphas and Ewan’s uncles,” Rowan clarifies. “And since his parents aren’t here yet, we’re happy to take full responsibility for how he turned out.”

The joke lightens the mood.

"Excuse us," Father says. "We've haven't been to a... a wolf pack... gathering before."

"That's fine. Just be yourselves."

My parents process this newfound information, and it is my mother who regains her composure first. Taking the arm of the other alpha, a man towering over her with a dark beard, she delves into a spirited discussion about her ideas for earth/ice partnerships and the potential magical and monetary benefits of combining two opposing elements.

"Is that good?" Ewan whispers.

"Great," I assure. "My parents live for networking and strategic connections. For them to recognize your value and seek to leverage it alongside their own is the highest compliment they could give."

It looks like we're all going to get along just fine.

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Six months later

The shuffle of boots, hammering, and the sounds of hard work fill the air at the construction site. In a short time, I've gotten used to this once completely unfamiliar environment.

Ewan tosses his gloves down and heads towards two nervous women at the edge of the commotion. They're the homeowners.

"There's a large blockage preventing us from laying the foundation on the west side of the house. We won't be able to get around it by ourselves."

"Oh no." The one with a swollen stomach brings a hand to her baby bump and rubs it absentmindedly. "We knew not everything would go according to plan, but..."

"Is it too much to ask for one thing to go right?" the woman's wife mutters, then shoots Ewan a tense smile. She isn't frustrated at him, only upset about the latest in a series of twists of fates that haven't gone in their favor.

"Don't worry," Ewan says. "There's a magical fix."

The two women exchange a worried glance. "Isn't that more expensive? We really can't—"

"Hey, I promised you when we started that I'd do my best to stay within your budget. You're supposed to let me worry about the details while you keep this little one safe." Ewan places a gentle hand on the woman's stomach. The gesture isn't rude since they

offered him explicit permission to touch the baby bump weeks ago. They feel very comfortable and impressed with their contractor, showing their remarkable good taste.

"If all goes well, we'll take care of the obstruction today. This is on the house," he promises.

Both women start shaking their heads immediately. "Oh, thank you Ewan, but we really can't ask for you a favor like that."

"You aren't. Jack's our magical consultant. It's a new service we're providing, free of charge in cases like this." He jerks his head towards me and I walk over to meet the couple. He introduces us and then puts an arm around me. "Jack is happy to help."

After all the time and effort it takes to brand, branded magical services are often on the expensive side. That's partly why I proposed an internship like this. I gain more experience with my new brand and earth powers while providing contractors and their customers with low-cost magical assistance. Ewan helped introduce me to the right companies and make the idea a reality.

When our conversation ends, the women leave the site satisfied and convinced we have it all under control. We will take care of their issue this afternoon, though there's another job we need to complete first.

Another new home in development happens to be two doors down. The task there is much simpler and will only take a bit of time and energy. Ewan and I walk over together. He's only seen me put the finishing touches on a property a few times and wants to observe. I think he likes watching me work.

With a fresh paint job and newly installed windows, there's only one thing missing from the home we arrive at. The flowerbeds are empty and waiting to be filled.

Ewan gives me an encouraging nod. “Go ahead, Jack. They’re going to love it.”

Putting everything in place only takes a few moments with him helping and then it’s time for the magic. Taking a deep breath, I beckon to the earth, feeling it respond with a gentle hum that vibrates through my fingertips.

Focusing on the image I want to create, I cast my spell. A surge of warmth rushes through me as the magic takes effect. The ground trembles slightly beneath our feet, and then, all at once, life bursts forth.

Flowers bloom in an explosion of colors. Next come the bushes lining the driveway. With a wave of my hand, small shrubs grow quickly, their branches reaching towards the sun as leaves unfurl in various shades of green.

Ewan claps me on the shoulder. “That’s some beautiful work.”

But I’m not done yet. Now comes my favorite part—enchanting the garden.

Closing my eyes, I reach out with my magic once more. This time it’s different; it’s less about commanding and more about connecting. I feel the vitality of each plant pulsating under my touch as if they are extensions of myself.

With care, I weave a protective enchantment into the garden, a hearty spell that will help the plants survive even in harsh weather.

Finally, I infuse the flowers with good energy. It’s not something visible to the naked eye, but the owners will feel it – an aura of positivity that washes over them every time they focus on the plants lining their new home.

Ewan’s standing in the grass and watching me work with open interest. He grins when I turn around and catch him staring. “You’re really good at this.”

”Should I be insulted that you sound surprised?”

“No, you’ve got the talent,” he assures. “But I remember when you had trouble growing an instant garden. Look at you now. These days I’m half afraid you’re doing earth magic in your sleep and we’re gonna wake up to a garden in our apartment.”

”Would that be so bad?” I tease.

”No, but the landlord will have some questions for us.”

”Ready to go take care of the blockage?” I wonder.

”Almost. One second.” Ewan fetches a hard hat and deposits it on my head. He makes it look much more attractive than me. The hat always looks so silly on me. But construction site rules are construction site rules. I must make a face because Ewan laughs. ”You”ll get used to hard hats one day.”

”Let”s agree to disagree on that.”

”Well, if you wanna back out, you better do it fast. I may have heard you”re going to be offered a contract soon.”

My internship is on the verge of becoming a full-time position. Construction companies such as Ewan’s do like the more lucrative magical jobs but might only see a handful of jobs a year that required dedicated magical support. It could be tricky to line up enough magical projects to justify a caster’s salary and also tricky to deal with logistics when hiring casters one job at a time.

With me on staff, multiple construction companies were partnering to split the costs for employing a wizard and give me a fair wage. I’d rotate between them, giving each company the opportunity to schedule complex projects with extensive earth magic. I’d have a full plate by working with several companies instead of just one and the

companies would also have me available in case of unexpected magical needs and emergencies. The best part of the arrangement is that it also allows for some pro bono services when a family can't afford magical assistance.

"I'm exactly where I want to be," I promise. "Solving problems, casting earth magic, and even helping people." I slip my hand in his as we turn back towards the other worksite. "And sometimes I'm lucky enough to see my boyfriend while on the job. What more could I possibly need?"

"I don't know." Ewan considers this as we walk back to the first property. "A pony?"

"No, no thank you." I suppress a shudder. "They'd shed far too much." Some earthbrands cherish strong connections with the animal world. Not me. Well, aside from wolves.

"Good call," Ewan says. "What if one of the wolves eats your pet?"

"They wouldn't!" I gasp. "Would they?"

"You never know. On a full moon and if they're hungry enough..."

Yuck, the mental image alone does make me shudder. "No, definitely no pony."

"Ewan can give you all the rides you need," someone tosses out from the nearby construction site.

Sam and a few other guys grumble and put a stop to this teasing immediately. "No Tony, cut that shit out! We aren't doing that."

"What? Why not?"

"Jack's a lot easier to fluster than Ewan. It's just not sporting."

“Oh, we haven’t been on a job together yet.” Tony jogs over to us and thrusts out his hand to shake in apology. “Sorry, my bad.”

The comment does embarrass me a bit, but I’m not offended since I understand he’s trying to get a rise out of us. He thought we agreed to a new betting pool until the other guys corrected him.

With Ewan settling down with someone, there was talk of getting a wager going again. Not only did a partner provide new ammunition that could finally embarrass Ewan Oakley, they thought his new man might be similarly difficult to fluster. It never became more than talk since I was the opposite of my boyfriend. Very easy to fluster even though I had the power to sometimes fluster Ewan.

“No worries.” I smile and shake Tony’s hand. I’ve noticed him over the past few days because he always senses when I arrive and knows whenever I use magic. “If you want a wager, you and Ewan can compete.”

Ewan furrows his brow. “Excuse me?”

“He has a talent for recognizing earth magic. Which one of you has the best senses?”

“Hell yeah,” Tony whoops, raising his chin in challenge to his leader. “You vs. me, boss. Let’s go.”

“Maybe later,” Ewan waves him away. “Get back to work.”

“You aren’t interested in a little friendly competition?” I wonder. “Don’t worry. I think you have a chance at winning. I’ll bet on you no matter what.”

“Ouch.” Ewan grimaces in mock pain. “You’re convinced he’s going to beat me?”

“It will be close. He’s good at sensing earth magic and you’re good at sensing my

earth magic.”

“Oh.” Ewan’s doubts melt away. “Yeah, we could give that a try.”

Ewan probably didn’t know why he was bothered, but I had a hunch. For Ewan, whenever he sensed my magic, he wasn’t just responding to the earth magic in the air. He was responding to me and my connection to the earth. This builder, Tony, was only responding to the earth magic.

I lean into him, not caring about anyone else bustling around the site. “And when it comes to me, there’s no competition. I love you.”

Ewan relaxes, a soft smile tugging at his lips. “I love you right back.”

The earth was more than just dirt and mud, seeds and flowers. Earth magic symbolizes hope and potential. Nothing was more beautiful than a flower in bloom or a wolf howling at the moon, running across the land.

Being with Ewan and accepting each other into our hearts felt right, even after only a short time together. Earth magic is all about nurturing a tiny seed of potential and watching it grow and blossom into reality.

Earth was about starting fresh and building a strong foundation for a life together. And that was exactly what we were going to do.